

GunDigest® Book of

RUGER REVOLVERS



THE DEFINITIVE HISTORY
MAX PRASAC



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RUGER
REVOLVERS**



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About Contributor David Bradshaw

Throughout this book, you're going to see quite a bit of writing and input from one David Bradshaw. So, just who is David Bradshaw?

David was born in Manhattan, but raised in Washington, D.C., and Old Greenwich, Connecticut. Trained in NRA junior riflery and High Power rifle, he was certified at 16 as a Master with the M1 Garand. He attended art school in Hartford, where he was exposed to the early Colt's revolvers at the Wadsworth Atheneum, and Samuel Colt masterpieces at Hartford State Library. A field worker in voter registration and in the civil rights movement, including but not limited to Virginia and Mississippi, David participated in the March on Washington, in 1963. He moved to New York, in the late 1960s, renovating lofts and beginning an art career. Next came a move to Vermont, ancestral home on his father's side. There he concentrated on revolver marksmanship, dynamited log jams, and sculpted.

David bought his first revolver, a .357 Magnum Blackhawk, at the age of 18, then shortly thereafter a Super Blackhawk. He taught himself fast-draw using holsters and belts of his own making.

In 1977, a friend in Vermont alerted David to an announcement in his newspaper of a metallic silhouette match. David showed up with a 6½-inch Smith & Wesson Model 29 and a holster he'd made and proceeded to mow down the competition shooting offhand, while his competitors took on the match shooting prone. Bradshaw shot high score, won the match, and was hooked from there.

David Bradshaw probably knows as much as anyone about the strengths and weaknesses of revolvers that are campaigned hard in the steel shooting game of silhouette. He has shot the best revolvers made into the winner's circle, along the way winning the top trophies from Ruger, Smith & Wesson, Hornady, and Federal. After predicting the 10½-inch Super Blackhawk .44 Magnum would rewrite the game of metallic silhouette, he shot that revolver — his dubbed the “Silhouette Super” — to victory in the first International Revolver Championship, in 1980.



David Bradshaw won many silhouette competitions, with a variety of revolvers. One of his finest was also one of Ruger's finest, the .357 Maximum Blackhawk.

David worked closely with the main proponent of the .357 Maximum, Bill Ruger, Jr., on development of the revolver and Ruger's .357 Maximum cartridge. There shortly followed the KS411N, the first stainless steel Super

Blackhawk, which also bears David's imprint. His first time out with the KS411N, David set the 140x160 revolver record, which he would later break. He is the only five-time IHMSA (International Handgun Metallic Silhouette Association) All-American, and he holds that to track a whitetail buck and take it with revolver to be a sacrament.



Author Photo

David Bradshaw (left) discussing revolver manufacture with Ruger's Assistant Business Unit Director, Revolvers, Thomas Kelley, at the Ruger plant, in Newport, New Hampshire.

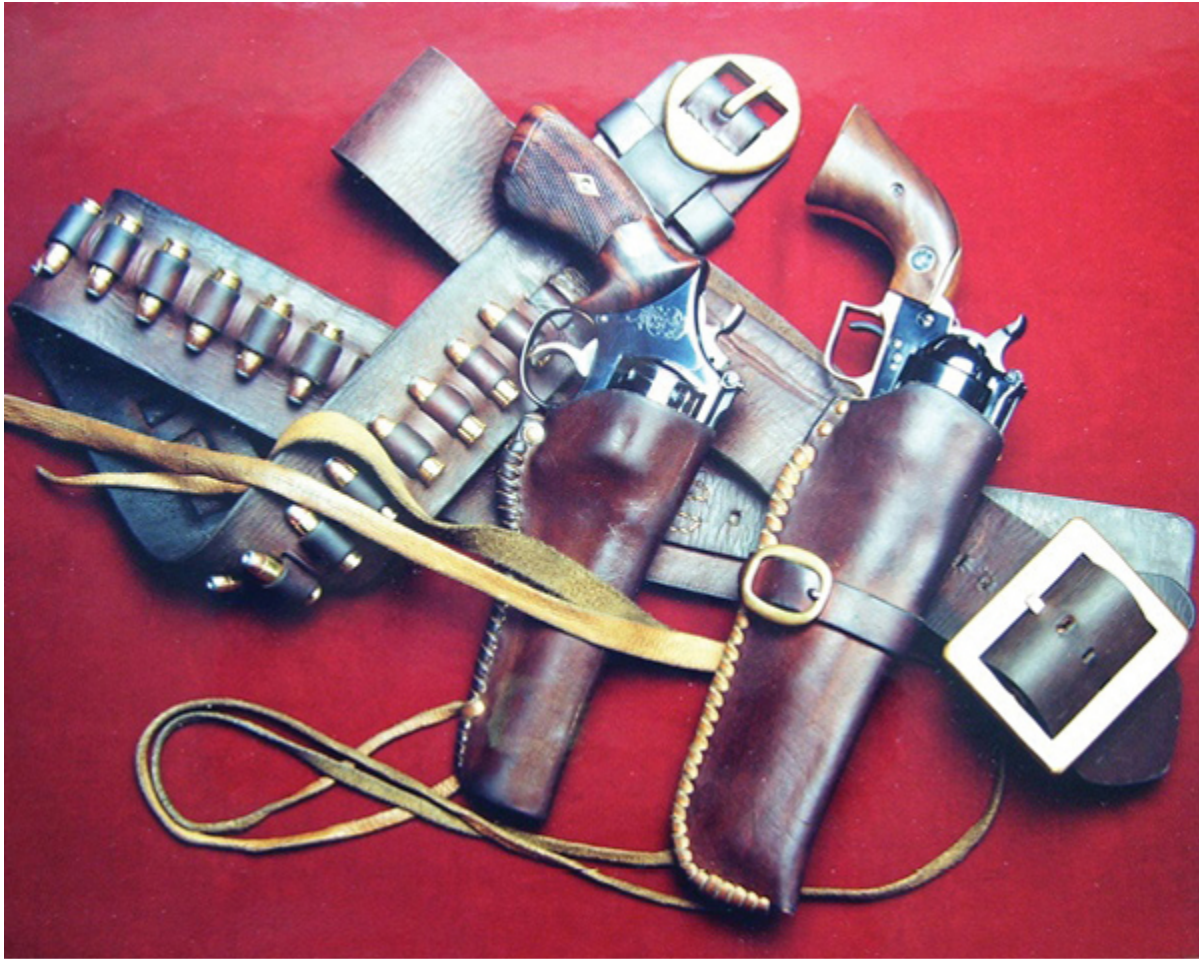


Photo by David Bradshaw

Leather and buckles by David Bradshaw from the mid-1960s. Left is a 6½-inch Model 29-2 in a water-molded holster of heavily waxed English saddle leather. The belt with pull-through loops is three inches wide on single layer, top-grain cowhide, perfect for day-in, day-out wear. It also features cowhide lacing. This Model 29 was the revolver Bradshaw shot in his first metallic silhouette match, a match he won. On the right is a Super Blackhawk “Old Model” with factory brass grip frame. This is the revolver David shot in the first IHMSA International Championship, in 1977. The holster is water-molded, vegetable-tanned “sole” leather, very hard and thick, with elk lacing. The buckles are fashioned from ¼-inch brass, with heavy copper tongues cut from old water pipe.



Photo by David Bradshaw

No longer shooting competitively, David Bradshaw still has chops!



Photo by David Bradshaw

Bradshaw's factory "custom" convertible Bisley revolver resting on one of two "Rugermobiles."

FOREWORD



Photo by Mark Gurne

The author, left, and David Bradshaw.

“One carefully designed experiment is worth a thousand expert opinions.” — *William B. Ruger, Jr.*

A refrain of William B. Ruger, Jr., over the years, Bill attributes the quote above to the long dead author of an abstruse text on science and engineering. The principle is as valid today as ever, though, as vital to manufacturing as it is to learning. Worth rubbing off on marksmanship, too.

This approach to new manufacturing techniques to which William B. Ruger, Sr., was exposed developed during World War II. After a couple false starts, Ruger introduced his seminal semi-auto pistol in .22 Long Rifle. From this modest beginning, Ruger, in short order, turned American

firearms manufacturing on its head. An ancient technique called “lost wax casting” became, for Ruger, what drop forging had been for Colt’s Manufacturing, Smith & Wesson, and Winchester. I have seen brilliantly detailed Chinese artifacts — pots, tureens, vessels — cast in copper and bronze by the lost wax process and that date back 6,000 years. Old as the process is, in practicality, it is as valid today as ever, submitting to the most exacting of steel alloy formulas. Now, after years of criticism directed at investment casting as being “weak,” we are forced to conclude that the person who utters such nonsense was educated at the School of Babble, or is otherwise numb between the ears.

Perhaps no public venue has proven the durability of Ruger’s lost wax casting as has handgun silhouette, where Ruger endurance remains unsurpassed. That durability proven on the firing line has carried directly to durability in the hunting fields. Ruger durability and Ruger design go hand-in-hand, no matter their use and application.



Author Photo

Max Prasac and I haven't known each other long, but I've found we have a few things in common. Max is an observant student of the revolver. When not shooting a revolver, he dreams of shooting a revolver. When not hunting with a revolver, he dreams of hunting with a revolver. Don't tell me this is a hobby. This is *life*. Of the Ruger New Model single-action we are, by experience, in complete agreement: the New Model is the vessel by which the single-action shall be carried into the ages.

As a competitive shooter, I never kept secrets: no secret load, no secret technique. I enjoy watching a marksman at his or her best. Winning is done at the top, not below it. But that winning is built on a base. All shooters must have a base and grow from it. Think marksmanship, as you read this book.

Max writes to share what he has learned, and his is an activity for which I wish to share guilt. Max possesses the mind, the eye, and the trigger finger

with which to write this book. To quietly observe, to shoot, and to call your shots That Max puts observation and marksmanship before writing is what liberates him to write this book.

— *David Bradshaw, May 28, 2013*



Photo by David Bradshaw

CHAPTER ONE

EVERY MAN'S REVOLVER

Writing this book was cause for reflection. I was tasked with capturing the essence of Ruger's revolvers, forcing me to examine, in detail, each and every revolver produced by Sturm, Ruger & Company. From the diminutive Bearcat with a grip so small only a miniscule hand can hope to wield it with any alacrity, to its polar opposite, the Super Redhawk, designed to shrug off, like so much water off of a duck's back, the debilitating effects of some of the biggest and most powerful cartridges ever designed for a handgun. Ruger's revolvers appear in all guises, from single-actions to double-actions, from aluminum alloys to composite plastics and special steels so tough they render the tools used to whittle them down to the dullness of a knife better suited to spreading jam on your toast. No matter the rather radical and obvious differences that separate the various models and designs from one another and the broad spectrum of calibers from Lilliputian rimfires to ferocious big-bore centerfire revolver cartridges, the DNA is unrepentantly Ruger, gloriously Ruger.

Gun Digest Book of Ruger Revolvers is my second effort. The working title in my head was "Every Man's Revolver." You see, Sturm, Ruger & Company represents something unique to me. There are more refined, as well as more expensive, revolvers on the market today, but you would be hard-pressed to find another firearms manufacturer whose technological innovations have so influenced the designs of its competition. How is that the case with Ruger? There are many ways, but one in particular is its investment casting. More on investment casting later, but suffice it to say there are a number of leading revolver manufacturers that share not only

designs similar to Ruger's offerings, but DNA, as well. Ruger's Pine Tree Casting facility manufactures parts for many industries, to include a number of well-known firearms manufacturers — and a large number, at that.

But back to the “Every Man's Revolver” working title I had in my head. Ruger revolvers are available, affordable, well made, and rugged — extremely rugged. The Ruger reputation for ruggedness is legendary. So prolific is this reputation for strength, there are “Ruger only” loads in loading manuals and available loaded from some specialty ammunition manufacturers. How's *that* for street cred? While perhaps not as refined as some other revolvers from the factory, as I mentioned above, I will argue that you will not find a nicer revolver at the Ruger's price point — period. And every Ruger revolver, both double- and single-actions, comes with a legacy of quality and innovation. From the finest safety system with which a revolver can be equipped (Ruger's transfer bar), to the use of revolutionary metallurgy and the most cutting edge investment casting on the planet, every Ruger revolver comes with the far-sighted vision of Bill Ruger Senior and Bill Ruger Junior. Ruger produces a quality product at affordable prices for the masses — they are, in their essence, Every Man's Revolver.



Photo by John Sykes

* * * * *

I paid Ruger's plant in New Hampshire a visit and was given a tour into the bowels of revolver manufacture. Ruger practices a production model known as "lean manufacturing," where all components of a single model are machined and assembled in a single manufacturing cell. All employees within the cell are cross-trained, enabling them to pick up slack where needed or so that, if one person is predisposed with another task, another can take over. Any of the associates on the line can stop production if a problem arises. Engineers are on the floor of the factory and are able to address issues and fix problems immediately. At the end of each day

there is a meeting, where any and every concern or problem is discussed, addressed, and potentially resolved. When needed, corrective action is decided and a person assigned the responsibility of fixing the issue. At the start of every shift there is also a cell meeting. This model encourages open and constant communication. Even customer service is handled in-house, so that the folks who build the guns get real-time feedback from the consumer. This is a model of efficiency that really works, in no uncertain terms.

I kicked off this book with a history lesson. Two guys with a better idea for building a pistol got together, and Sturm, Ruger & Company now commands a large percent of the marketplace. There are other works that delve into this specific topic with more detail, but I felt that going more deeply would only detract from what I am attempting to accomplish here, and that is a celebration of Ruger revolvers.

Between These Covers

The single-actions were the first revolvers Ruger began producing, that at a time when America's airwaves were being bombarded with Westerns and more and more households were acquiring televisions as they became mainstream and affordable. Bill Ruger wanted to offer an affordable, quality, single-action revolver for the masses and, with that goal in mind, gave us the Single-Six revolver.

I took a look at every single-action model and even included the most comprehensive Ruger single-action revolver grip frame chart ever compiled, that work by the Ruger Collectors Association's Bill Hamm, as well as Boge and Jeff Quinn of Gunblast.com. This chart can be viewed on the Gunblast.com website. It is an invaluable source of information, and the

website in and of itself is teaming with quality information. I recommend you take a look, as you won't be disappointed.

Double-actions are up next, from Ruger's strapping flagship, the Super Redhawk, culminating in the high-tech personal-defense revolver, the LCR. Ruger's reputation for building strong revolvers is clearly evident, when we look at its double-actions. "Over-engineering" is a term I have heard many times, when Ruger double-action revolvers are being discussed, though it is a common theme throughout Ruger's broad line of firearms.

Despite semi-automatic pistols gaining maximum popularity in this hostile political climate, such demand led by a number of plastic-framed, reliable, accurate, and completely soulless pistols, revolvers are still alive and well in today's market. Not only do a number of firearms manufacturers produce and sell large volumes of revolvers, they continue to refine and improve the modern double-action type. Proof is Ruger's LCR, the polymer-framed defensive revolver that is exceedingly popular.

[Chapter Five](#) is simply entitled "Technological Innovations." This chapter should open a few eyes to some innovations that have affected the entire firearms industry. As far as I know, no one has tackled this array of subjects, and it was enlightening, to say the very least and particularly for me, as I dug a deeper. Anyone familiar with Ruger revolvers and reloading knows that loading manuals typically include "Ruger only" loads, as part of their data — and, yes, they are on the higher end of the spectrum. Rugers have a well-founded reputation for strength, and we will be looking closely at this.

Not only are Ruger revolvers (as well as other firearms Sturm, Ruger & Company produce), typically stronger than their competitors', they have produced them to last several lifetimes. Ruger has developed a number of

great technological innovations, such as the transfer bar safety system, that have become a standard in the industry.

Another area in which Sturm, Ruger & Company shines is in investment casting. I spent a few days with Ruger engineers in New Hampshire, to learn more about this remarkable company and the designs and technologies that have developed and refined over the course of its existence. The company has written the book on this technology and, as such, produces many parts for many other industries, everything from automotive rocker arms to prosthetic, as well as revolver frames, cylinders, and other firearm parts for quite a few firearms manufacturers, the likes of which would more than likely surprise a few of you. I know it surprised me!

Next up is a chapter on custom revolvers. There is no more widely used foundation for a custom revolver than those from Ruger's single-action offerings. They provide a strong, customizable canvas to which masters such as Hamilton Bowen, Alan Harton, John Linebaugh, and Jack Huntington apply their considerable skills. While my inclusion of custom revolvers in this book may seem somewhat gratuitous, I plead innocence — well, I'm a little bit guilty. If you read my previous book, *Big-Bore Revolvers*, you will note my clear obsession with custom revolvers, and I felt this would be an appropriate place to talk about them and get some firsthand opinions from some of the top custom gunsmiths. It also gave me an excuse to include some beautiful photos of some gorgeous custom revolvers. The first step to recovery is an admission, they say. But of this weakness for customs, I fear there is no cure.

Last, but certainly not least, is a chapter on hunting with a Ruger revolver. For me, at least, hunting with a revolver is the highest pursuit with a handgun. I love shooting, punching paper, knocking down silhouettes, etc., but stalking up close to an animal that bites back and then cleanly

taking it with a revolver is the Holy Grail, for this author. It's a challenge I don't get from hunting with a rifle, and it is one that requires a dedication to prodigious practice and field craft. It's not for everyone.

Allow me to interject a disclaimer here. I want to put this up front, before the chronically pessimistic and critical attempt to lambaste me. This book was never intended to be a point by point chronology for the collector to use as a reference. That doesn't mean it *wouldn't* be useful to the collector or would-be collector, but, within the limited confines of this book, there was no way I could get down into the weeds with each and every revolver discussed. Indeed, you may notice that some revolvers received considerably more attention in these pages than notable others. Those were the ones I felt played a more significant role in the advancement of handgun development, though some I simply have a lot more exposure and experience with. Too, let's face it, some are simply more interesting than others. This may please some and annoy others. My intention is not to leave some revolvers out of the more detailed discussion, there simply isn't enough time, space, or interest to develop further than I did — in my humble opinion.



Photo by Matt Cosenzo

The author is an avid and passionate handgun hunter of big game. His arsenal of favorite revolvers to take afield include more than a few Rugers, both “average” calibers and big-bores, but those from other makers, including custom shop creations, also find room in his holster from time to time.



Author Photo

Max Prasac, left, with noted Ruger revolver expert, author, and all-around great guy John C. Dougan.

Before I let you go to explore the pages of this book, I would like to introduce David Bradshaw. You probably noticed that he wrote the foreword of this book. For a complete biography, you can see the section at the front of the book, “About Contributor David Bradshaw,” but, while I have you here, let me tell you a little bit about David.

Those of you who have followed or participated in metallic silhouette in its heyday will recognize the name for the accomplishments attached to it. David was a friend and frequent guest of Bill Ruger Senior and Junior alike. The Rugers valued his input and knew he could be trusted with honest opinions and serious testing. David’s feedback provided the Rugers with valuable information that impacted the design of a number of revolver models to come down the production line. David provides a unique, inside perspective not only about the company, but also about the men who shaped it, and that’s a perspective that, up until this time, hasn’t been recorded.

I hope you not only enjoy this book from an entertainment standpoint, but find it useful as well. This is, at its heart, truly a celebration of Ruger revolvers.

CHAPTER TWO

IN THE BEGINNING

William Batterman Ruger was born on June 21, 1916, to Adolf and May Batterman Ruger, in Brooklyn, New York. Adolf's family was from the north of Germany. His great grandfather Julius had immigrated to the United States, in the 1840s. His grandfather, also named Julius, fought in the Civil War, then became a portrait painter in Brooklyn, after the hostilities ended. May, William's mother, was born of a family of wealthy New York department store owners.

William's father, Adolf, was a rather successful trial lawyer, who, unfortunately, turned to drink, when his law practice began to have trouble. On the eve of the Great Depression, heavily leveraged with the bank, Adolf lost it all, including the business, the house, and the farm. Adolf and May's marriage ended on that note, and May moved herself and the kids to William's maternal grandfather's house, in Brooklyn. It was here that William spent the remainder of his childhood.

William B. Ruger was no ordinary child. He was one obsessed with design and possessed of a talent and vision for creating. By age 11, young William had designed a motor yacht, by 14, a vacuum motor. Firearms design would be in his sights before long: He began design work on a toggle-bolt machine gun as early as 1932. It was eventually formalized and submitted for patent in 1940.

William Ruger worked for Auto-Ordnance, during World War II. While there, the young man designed and built a prototype semi-automatic pistol of high quality, sound design, and the potential to be affordable. But more on the .22 pistol later.

Bill Ruger was also an automobile enthusiast. In typical fashion, he believed he could build a better mousetrap and actually explored the plausibility of producing an automobile of his own design, one inspired by the 1929 Bentley Vanden Plas Tourer. You will note that a number of Ruger's revolvers sport the names of automobiles, so much was his love for cars. (Bill actually built two prototype autos in the late-'60s. See the sidebar in this chapter for details.)

The previously mentioned toggle-bolt machine gun was shopped around by Bill to Remington, Smith & Wesson, Mossberg, High Standard, and Springfield Armory, in an effort to interest them in his design and help him possibly secure employment. But, it was Auto-Ordnance that ultimately recognized his many talents and hired the young Ruger. While at Auto-Ordnance, Bill worked on refining his machine gun design, in hopes it would meet the Ordnance Department's lofty requirements. He came close, but, with the end of the Second World War, the needs of the military shifted, and with that shift, a new machine gun design was excluded. The war ended, as did Auto-Ordnance's need for William Ruger's services.

His release from the employ of Auto-Ordnance proved fortuitous. It forced the young, brilliant Ruger to make a go on his own (much to every Ruger enthusiast's good fortune today!). Following World War II, with a number of years of design and manufacturing experience under his belt, William turned to the desire for his very own company. Enter the Ruger Corporation.

In 1945, Bill Ruger and his partner, McMillan Clements, opened a small factory, in Southport, Connecticut, called the Ruger Corporation, to perform contract machining and manufacture a line of hand tools. The Ruger Corporation would actually even produce parts for Auto-Ordnance products, as that company shifted its efforts to address a post-war

manufacturing market and was no longer producing firearms. Their factory consisted of a leased space in a complex of wooden buildings, diagonally across from the New York, New Haven & Hartford Railroad depot. The building is affectionately known as the “Red Barn.” Eventually, William would build a new factory on Lacey Place, in Southport, a stone’s throw from the original facility.

From the very start, Bill Ruger envisioned some day producing his .22-caliber semi-automatic pistol, so he leased more than 1,500 square feet of manufacturing space and put together a crew of skilled machinists and metal workers to set up shop for production. Much of the machinery William acquired was old and decrepit, but, once refurbished, it was ready to go.

For any number of reasons, the Ruger Corporation had its ups and downs, then found itself treading in troubled water. By the middle of 1948, the Ruger Corporation was in debt to the tune of \$40,000-plus; the bank began initiating foreclosure proceedings in the fall of that year. But all was not lost. Just in time, William Batterman Ruger found a new business partner. His collaboration with a certain Alexander Sturm, in 1949, would change history.

A graduate from Yale University, Alexander “Sandy” McCormick Sturm, was somewhat of a Renaissance man, an accomplished writer, artist, actor, filmmaker and, probably most importantly, a firearms enthusiast. Almost as important was the fact that Alexander McCormick Sturm had the financial means to back a good idea. Sturm got his opportunity to invest, when Bill Ruger introduced him to a beautiful .22 pistol design he’d made in his spare time after his machining business shut down, a pistol similar in appearance to the German Luger. Ruger was convinced it could be manufactured inexpensively enough, yet of a quality high enough to compete with the

likes of Colt and High Standard and their ever-popular .22 caliber pistols (the Colt Woodman and High Standard .22). Fifty thousand dollars later, Sturm, Ruger & Company was born, and the Ruger .22 became a resounding success. Though Sturm, Ruger & Company had struggled in the early days, it had overcome a number of obstacles to ship 1,138 .22 pistols, in 1949. Shortly thereafter, William Batterman Ruger got the great idea to build a single-action revolver. This is where our story really begins.

The Rugermobiles

By David Bradshaw

The Rugermobiles — there are two — are evidence not only of William Ruger Senior's love for the automobile, but of a man imbued with the knowledge and ability to make something better.

I expect a lot may be learned about these cars on the Internet, but I can tell you that William Ruger, Sr., held the Bentley 1929 touring car in high esteem. While we were working with and shooting the SRM prototype .357 Maximums and other guns — from the select-fire AC556 series to the .458 Win Mag, Valmet and SIG choppers, as well as several inferior though highly touted revolvers — the “Old Man” in wool cap and his frayed tweed sports coat with the suede elbows flapping, would fire up the Bentley's huge six and take it touring. The sleek black Bentley, with its big wire wheels and top down, Bill Ruger at the wheel, was a sight to behold.

No matter how much I enjoyed burning other people's powder, along with a considerable supply of my own, I couldn't help but stop shooting, so that I could admire Mr. Ruger in his element, fresh

oxygen blasting his brain. This is the man, more than any other, who properly armed blue collar America, in our lifetime.

The Ruger cars were inspired, more than any other, by that 1929 Bentley, with the throb of modern horsepower added. Had the car been put into production, according to Bill, Jr., a more available Ford 428 CID would have been installed in place of the 427 CID/425 HP of these prototypes. Unless I have the details jangled, the 428 was a strong motor, designed for trucks, with rev potential. Had the car been put into production with the Ford 428 CID, it probably would have been re-cammed, with a few other mods. Ruger, Jr., of course, knows the story from the inside.



Bill Ruger, Jr., with the first production .357 Maximum revolver, sitting in one of the Rugermobiles, hand-built automobiles of Bill Ruger Senior's design.



Photos by David Bradshaw

A Rugermobile adorned with a very special hood ornament!

CHAPTER THREE

THE SINGLE-ACTIONS PART I





Photo by David Bradshaw

The granddaddy of all single-action revolvers, the iconic Colt Single Action Army, also known as the “Peacemaker.” This one was built in 1897 and is chambered in .45 Colt.

Single-Actions — A Bygone Era

John Dougan, Ruger revolver expert and author, began his book *Great Western Arms Company* with, “The traditional Great Western Arms lead-in narrative always focuses on the western movie-making industry.” So goes the narrative of all American post-war single-action revolver production.

Essentially, all single-action revolvers, Rugers included, share their family tree with Colt’s Single Action Army, also known as the “Peacemaker.” Despite modern metallurgy, modern internals, and state of the art precision manufacturing and assembly, Ruger’s single-action revolvers are distant cousins to the revolvers that won the West. That’s right, not only do they look similar, they share DNA.

Ruger jumped into the single-action market with both feet, in the 1950s, when America was ripe for an affordable, quality, single-action revolver.

The Western movie genre was very popular then, a genre invading more and more households with the advent of affordable television sets.

These were simpler times and the world was seen through two lenses, one good, one bad, with nothing gray in between. The good guys on television always wore white and carried a Colt Peacemaker, sometimes two, slung low on their hips. Of course, the bad guys carried the same revolvers, giving the public a double dose of Single Action Army! “Each movie starred a tall, handsome, soft-spoken gentleman who was always confident, and it was clear to us exactly where he stood,” quipped John Dougan in *Great Western Arms Company*. Bill Ruger, Sr., was an astute man, who clearly saw the western invasion and the emerging cultural trend. He jumped into the fray with a great idea and unbridled enthusiasm, and the Single Six was born.

There is something inexplicably special about single-action revolvers. They are simple, aesthetically pleasing to the eye, and ergonomic to the hand. Most importantly, they have a soul, something other handguns fail to possess. It is a soul that harkens back to the days when men settled their differences face to face on a dusty street with gun play. The faster, more accurate shooter was able to keep his life and live to fight another day. A time punctuated with names like Wild Bill Hickok, Billy the Kid, and Doc Holiday, and places with names like Boot Hill, Dodge City, and OK Corral, it was a dangerous existence for saloon dwellers, gamblers, lawmen, and the innocent bystanders who simply wound up in the wrong place at the right time. It was also a time that conjures up “romantic” notions of driving cattle, robbing stagecoaches, and settling the western territories.

All these heady images are encapsulated in three pounds of steel with a wooden grip. When you hold one in your hand, close your eyes, and pull back on the hammer, you can envision a time long ago through each click of

the hammer moving back. The single-action revolver, even in modern times, is a throwback, a piece of history. It is a relic of a bygone era, where rugged individualism paved the way to the modern existence we enjoy today, with blood, sweat, an indomitable spirit, and grit.

This is where the Ruger revolver story begins. It is also where my personal love affair with them has its starts, and it's from this place that I'll provide you an overview of Sturm Ruger & Company's various single-action revolvers. For a more detailed account, I would highly recommend John Dougan's various books on Ruger revolvers, particularly *Ruger Pistols and Revolvers*, as invaluable tools to the collector and enthusiast alike.

Before we really begin, it's important to understand that the single-action revolvers from Sturm, Ruger & Company can be broken into two distinct generations: the Old Model, or "Three Screw" revolvers, and the New Models. Because of this, this is a two-part story, the first "half" from the early '50s through 1972 and constituting the "Old Model" era, and the second part beginning in 1973, when Ruger's offerings became "New Model" revolvers. The distinction between the two, in simplified terms, centers around the addition of the patented "transfer bar safety system," which will be discussed in greater detail in [Chapter Five](#).

The Single-Six

With the increasing popularity of Western films and television shows in the 1950s, where Colt's famous Peacemaker Single Action Army figured prominently on the hips of both the good guys and bad, and a renewed interest arose from collectors and shooters alike in the Single Action Army, Bill Ruger set his engineers to building a better mousetrap, a revolver of superior design and materials to Colt's famous six-shooter. Colt's had ceased production of the Single Action Army shortly after the onset of

World War II, but resumed production of the famous sixgun, the “Model P,” in 1956, in Hartford, Connecticut. So prolific was Colt’s famous wheelgun, Bill Ruger’s mandate, then, was a tall order. Stunned, Ruger engineers would attack this project with vigor and produce the new “Single-Six,” a scaled-down version of the Colt that would feature all the Colt’s attributes and none of its weaknesses, such as the failure-prone cylinder bolt, main spring, and the firing pin.

At the time of Bill Ruger Senior’s decision to build a single-action revolver, there was one other company, out of southern California, that had been producing nearly exact copies of Colt’s Single Action Army as early as 1954, right behind Ruger’s first shipments of Single-Sixes. That company was the Great Western Arms Company, and it almost single-handedly supplied firearms to the movie industry for Western productions. Great Western closed its doors, in 1964. By 1956, Erl Svendsen had manufactured his first of anywhere from 200 to 300 “Pony Express” single-action revolvers, just outside Chicago. One other gentleman during this time frame, Alonzo Krull, kept busy converting Colt Lightning and Thunderers into .22 RF target-grade single-action revolvers. It is estimated that Krull created 400 or so of these conversions. As you can see, the competition for Ruger was on a relatively small scale.



Photo by Lee Martin

In the 1950s, the popularity of T.V. Westerns sparked the production of a number of different single-action revolvers. One of the more well-known manufacturers was the Great Western Arms Company, which produced copies of the Colt Single Action Army. The gun shown here is a rather rare version in .357 Atomic, a hotter .357 chambering, in the ultra-rare matte finish.

Bill Ruger was a savvy man. He wanted to produce a single-action revolver for the masses, one that was not only of unparalleled quality, but one also affordable. That was the decision behind chambering the new Single-Six in .22 rimfire, instead of the centerfire revolver cartridges of the day that were more expensive to shoot. The entire revolver was scaled to the diminutive .22-caliber, save for the grip frame, which mimicked Colt's Single Action Army. As noted in the previous chapter, Bill Ruger Senior was an automobile enthusiast, and the name for his first revolver was that of the Single-Six engine used by Packard.

While the Single-Six revolver appeared of a traditional design externally, including the flat loading gate — hence the designation by collectors of “Flatgates,” of which approximately 60,000 were produced — internally, the new Ruger single-action was all modern, replacing the traditional flat

and breakage-prone springs and coil spring lockwork. The Single-Six was produced with a flat loading gate until 1957, when it then received a contoured gate. The original barrel length was 5½ inches. Later several barrel lengths were added to include 4⅝, 6½, and 9½-inch tubes. A convertible option also made the scene with two cylinders, one chambered in .22 LR and one in .22 WMR (Magnum). A bore diameter of .219-inch was chosen for the convertible model, as the best compromise between the size disparity of the .22 LR and the larger .22 WMR. One could also purchase a Single-Six chambered only in .22 Magnum, with a 6½-inch barrel the only barrel length offered.



Photo by Mike Savitkas

A Single-Six, circa 1968.

To this initial stable, a lightweight model was eventually introduced, in 1956, featuring an aluminum alloy frame and an aluminum alloy cylinder in the early models. The lightweights featured a short, 4⅝-inch barrel, to help cut weight.

The year 1963 marked a grip change for the first time in the Single-Six's production run, changing the model designation from the XR3 to the XR3-

RED (the RED standing for “redesign”). This new grip offered larger-handed shooters a little more grip surface for more comfortable shooting.

Ten years later, 1973 became a banner year for all Ruger single-action revolvers. That was the year they made the transition from Old Model to New Model designation, with the addition of Ruger’s innovative and patented transfer bar safety system. The new system allowed for carry in the field with a loaded chamber under the hammer, unlike previous models (including the Colt Single Action Army). It is easy to distinguish Old Model Ruger single-actions from the New Models: the Old Models feature three screws in the frame, whereas the New Models have two pins.



Photo by John C. Dougan, courtesy of Mowbray Publishers

This is a Single-Six production prototype.



The owner of this Single-Six had another Single-Six he once loved. He foolishly traded it after a while for the “new and improved model.” He found this one locally, new in the box, with the original bill of sale, a box of ammo minus six shells, and a cleaning kit that had been used one time. The seller was the son of the gun’s original owner, who had kept it in the box in a closet for the previous 53 years. The gun was made in 1958 and is the same year/model as the new owner’s original Single-Six!

A whole slew of fresh Single-Sixes was ushered into the New Model era, to include both blued and stainless steel models and convertibles. In 1974, the Single-Six was offered in stainless steel, and then, in 1984, for the first time in decades, the Single-Six was offered in a caliber other than .22, with the introduction of the .32 H&R Magnum. Two decades later, the first sub-.22 cartridge was offered, the .17 HMR.

The .32 H&R (by the Federal Cartridge Corporation), marked the first centerfire cartridge offered in the Single-Six. It was a distinctive break from the gun’s rimfire past and was available through 1997. The cartridge bridged the gap between .22 LR and the .38 Special +P, from a power standpoint. Of course, modifications were necessary to turn the rimfire Single-Six into a centerfire revolver, but the Single-Six adapted well. The

.32 H&R Magnum version would also handle the .32 S&W and .32 S&W Long cartridges, those rounds both sporting shorter cases. The new centerfire Single-Six was available in stainless or blued, with a barrel length of 4 $\frac{5}{8}$, 5 $\frac{1}{2}$, 6 $\frac{1}{2}$, or 9 $\frac{1}{2}$ inches. After a 13-year hiatus, the .32 H&R Magnum was again made available in the year 2000, this time fitted with a 4 $\frac{5}{8}$ -inch tube and fixed sights.

Another new caliber was introduced in 2003, a varmint round, the .17 HMR. In 2005, a convertible “Hunter” version was added to the already impressive Single-Six lineup, chambered in .17 HMR and the ballistically hotter .17 Mach 2. Only a 7 $\frac{1}{2}$ -inch barrel was made available in this latter configuration and, like other Ruger “Hunter” models, the revolver incorporated integral scope ring mounts in the barrel’s rib, making the use of an optic a simple endeavor.



Photo by Cory Neumiller

The Flatgate Ruger Single-Six.



Photo by Greg Wagner

This is a .327 Magnum New Model Single-Six with a four-inch S&W M48 barrel, steel grip frame, Turnbull color case hardening, Bisley hammer, Bowen rear sight, and musk ox grips crafted by Roy Fishpaw.



Photo by Doug Berry

Doug Berry commissioned Alan Harton, of Single Action Service, to build this Single-Six to match his customized .45 Colt Montado. The barrel was shortened to 3¾ inches to also match the Montado. It features a Bisley hammer, free-spin pawl, custom Patridge-style front sight and base, S&W J-frame adjustable rear sight, Colt-style ejector rod, shortened base pin, blackpowder chamfer on the front of the cylinder, and one very slick action and trigger job.



Photo by Rob Millette

This Single-Six was converted by Nightowl Customs to a five-shot .357 Magnum.

The Single-Six is still going strong in the twenty-first century. Today's buyer has a number of options to choose from, everything from adjustable sights to different grip frame options (the Bisley grip is now a choice), stainless or blue, Hunter model or standard, barrels ranging in length from $4\frac{5}{8}$ to $9\frac{1}{2}$ inches, convertible or standard, .17 HMR, .22 LR, or .22 WMR, and the list goes on. Capacity has even increased in two models: the Single-Nine and the Single-Ten get nine rounds of .22 WMR or 10 rounds of .22 LR, respectively. Times are good, and the first revolver produced by Ruger is still very popular.



Photo by Rob Millette

This convertible Single-Six features a 9½-inch barrel.

Along with its popularity, the story of Ruger's Single-Six is also one of success. Close to 600,000 Old Model units were sold, making it the biggest single-action commercial success for Ruger and a number overshadowing all other Ruger revolver models by a wide margin. Indeed, because of the enthusiastic reception by the national gun press and the efforts of a modest advertising campaign waged by Sturm, Ruger & Company, the Single-Six was in demand before it was even made available!



Photo by Adam Strickland

This convertible stainless steel Single Six has a 6½-inch barrel and was bead-blasted by its owner to give it more of a matte finish.

Engraved Single-Sixes

Even before the Single-Six revolver was finalized from a design and tooling standpoint, the third prototype was assembled and shipped to Texas for engraving by the late, great Cole Agee, a well-known artisan of the time. This gun would become known as the “Amber Single-Six,” after John T. Amber, the first editor of *Gun Digest*. This was in early 1953, and before the Single-Six was ready for full production, Ruger announced and advertised engraving as an option.

By the spring of 1954, Single-Six production was underway, and William Batterman Ruger turned his attention to another engraving project. A pair of Single-Sixes was subsequently shipped to Spain, in March 1954, for

engraving, then another set of 20 in December. Spain has long been renowned for its tradition of skilled engraving. Shortly after, a talented young engraver named Charles H. Jerred, of Fulton, New York, took delivery of 250 Single-Sixes, Blackhawks, and Super Blackhawks (238 of the revolvers were Single-Sixes), to be engraved by his skilled hands. A number of other artisans were commissioned to engrave individual and gun pairs, depending on demand, but, by 1958, following a sharp drop in demand, engraving had all but faded away.

Super Single-Six

The Super Single-Six was introduced towards the end of 1964 as a convertible (.22 LR/.22 WMR) Single-Six. It differed from the Single-Six in that it featured an adjustable rear sight and a ramp front. The Super Single-Six was available with either a 5½- or 6½-inch barrel and an XR3-RED grip frame.

The Bearcat

Introduced in 1958 and named after the Stutz Bearcat automobile, the Ruger Bearcat was unique in that it featured a one-piece cylinder and grip frame made of blued, anodized aluminum alloy. The Bearcat featured a roll-engraved cylinder. Resin-impregnated rosewood laminate grips were standard until 1963, when walnut grip panels became the norm. This revolver differed from not only Ruger's other single-action revolvers, but also from other makes of single-actions. More compact than the Single-Six, but also chambered in .22-caliber, the Bearcat resembled the 1858 Remington New Model Police cap-and-ball revolver. Only available with a four-inch barrel and weighing in at a paltry 17 ounces, the Bearcat was intended by Ruger to replace the failing Lightweight Single-Six revolver.



Photo by Lee Martin

This is an Old Model Bearcat from the late 1960s.



Author Photo

A Distributor Exclusive stainless steel Ruger Bearcat from Lipsey's, with bird's-head grip frame and rosewood grips.



Photo by Bud Rummel

Owned by Professional Hunter Bud Rummel, this Bearcat was produced in 1962.



Photo by Rob Millette

This Ruger Bearcat in .22 LR is owned by Rob Millette.



Photo by Jeff Quinn

This Alan Harton-built Bearcat belongs to Boge Quinn, of Gunblast.com fame. This little pocket-rocket is chambered in .327 Federal!

Fast forward to 1971, and Ruger releases the Super Bearcat, following a 14-month gap in the aluminum-framed version's production. While dimensionally identical to its aluminum predecessor, the Super Bearcat was cast in steel. Gone was the gold-toned aluminum triggerguard; in its place was blued steel.

Today, the New Bearcat is available in two configurations. Both are in .22 LR, both with a 4.2-inch barrel, six-shot cylinder, and wooden grips, one in blued steel, the other stainless.

The Blackhawk

Making its first appearance as a .357 Magnum, in 1955, approximately one year later, a larger framed Blackhawk was introduced in .44 Remington Magnum. These two calibers only were offered over the next decade of production. The Blackhawk was the second Ruger revolver, after the Bearcat, that was named after an automobile made by Stutz.



Photo by Lee Martin

A first-year, mid-frame .357 Magnum Flattop, from 1955.

As would be expected, two differing frame sizes were produced. The .357 is what is known as a “mid-frame” and mimics the stature of the famous Colt Single Action Army (SAA) revolver. The Colt SAA cylinder will physically fit in the frame window of the mid-frame Ruger Blackhawk. The grip frame is also of a similar profile to that of the Colt SAA.

Blackhawk .357 Magnum Flattops all feature the XR3 grip frame, with one exception, and they were the revolvers that were produced, at the end of

1962, with the XR3-RED grip frame. The production of these particular revolvers is attributed as the reason the supply of XR3 grip frames ran out. The Flattop .357s were fitted with an adjustable rear sight provided by the MICRO Sight Company of California, and these sights are marked with “Micro.”



Photo by Lee Martin

A first-year, 1956 .44 Magnum Flattop with factory stag grips. These grips are exceptionally rare, and this particular gun may be unfired.

In 1963, the .357 mid-frame Blackhawk received a makeover, to include a new topstrap that encapsulated the rear sight; gone was the mid-frame Flattop, and the XR3-RED grip frame became the standard. Production ended in 1973 for the mid-frame.

The .44 Magnum model was physically larger by approximately 1/8-inch in both depth and length. These early Blackhawk revolvers were known as “Flattops,” so named for the flat portion of the frame’s topstrap.

The Blackhawk Grows Up

The legend begins, in the winter of 1955-’56, with a Ruger employee giving William B. Ruger a number of once-fired unmarked cases, claiming to have found them in the dumpster of a local scrap yard. (How random is that?) Bill Ruger’s curiosity was aroused enough to delve into a little detective work. His investigation eventually led him to the office of Remington’s Dewey Godfrey, where, with a little prodding, he learned of the super-secret new project Remington was conducting in conjunction with Smith & Wesson. That project was none other than the .44 Remington Magnum, a powerful handgun cartridge the likes of which had never before been seen. Bill Ruger must have been a persuasive fellow, as he left Godfrey’s office with enough specifications and technical details to start the ball rolling at Sturm at Ruger & Company, into the new realm of super revolvers.



Photo by Lee Martin

A 1959 10-inch .44 Magnum flattop with aftermarket ivories. Only 1,050 or fewer of these exist.

Not wishing, willing, or accepting to be outdone by the likes of Smith & Wesson, an energized Sturm, Ruger & Company endeavored to beat the other company to the punch, by introducing its very own production revolver in the all-new, most powerful magnum cartridge. By the fall of 1956, and in record time, the .44 Magnum Blackhawk design was finalized, and the tool design and production plans were completed to make the new, more powerful Blackhawk a commercial reality.

Ruger shocked the shooting world with the announcement of the new .44 Magnum Blackhawk in the pages of the NRA's *American Rifleman* magazine and a summer edition of *Guns & Ammo* magazine. But that's not where the story either begins or ends.

It has been erroneously repeated by a great many gun scribes, including myself, that Ruger actually beat Smith & Wesson to market with the first .44 Magnum revolver. Through extensive research, author John Dougan, in his book *Ruger Pistols and Revolvers*, revealed that the production of the Smith & Wesson .44 Magnum N-frame began in December of 1955, but wasn't formally announced until January of the following year. This was eight months *before* Ruger's .44 Magnum Blackhawk was shipped. However, this revelation should neither diminish nor detract from the heroic undertaking of design, testing, building and, ultimately, the bringing to market a revolver of the quality and caliber of Ruger's .44 Magnum Blackhawk.

The first .44 Magnum prototypes built by Ruger engineers were created on the small .357 frame. Purportedly, they held together well, until proof loads in the 90,000 psi realm bulged a cylinder. It is not clear whether or not the topstrap let go; we have heard both versions, that it both did and didn't, from various sources. At the same time, Great Western Arms Company was producing a revolver that was Single Action Army-esque, but had found top-end .44 Magnum loads to be problematic. Ruger responded by building a marginally larger frame.

Upon announcing the .44 Magnum Blackhawk in mid-to-late 1956, the Ruger catalog and other literature stated the following:



Photo by Lee Martin

A Williams Shooter Supply .45 Colt Bisley with the 5½-inch barrel. The rollmarks on the cylinder have been removed.

The cylinder is the heart of any revolver. In our .44 Magnum caliber Blackhawk we have the longest and heaviest cylinder of any single-action on the market. This extra length and weight in the RUGER Blackhawk .44 cylinder means extra strength and versatility for the handloader. All competitive single-action revolvers have cylinders which are substantially identical to our .357 Blackhawk cylinders.

While these smaller cylinders can be made to accept the present factory loaded .44 Magnum ammunition, the result is essentially a

makeshift gun. The cylinder walls are thin, considering the pressures developed, and longer bullets cannot be used because they will project from the forward end of the short cylinder. In building our .44 Magnum caliber Blackhawk around a correctly proportioned cylinder, we have virtually built an entire new gun. The cylinder frame has been lengthened and reinforced to such a degree that its production required major retooling in our plant.

With the open “arms race” between Smith & Wesson and Sturm, Ruger & Company to bring the .44 Magnum to market first, one would think that the catalog verbiage above was directed at Smith & Wesson. In fact, it is speculated that this language was squarely directed at Great Western Arms. John Dougan’s intensive research of paperwork and other documentation to include catalogs, letters, and invoices, revealed that Great Western Arms actually *beat* the .44 Magnum Blackhawk to market by as many as *four months*! The Great Western Arms tag line in its product brochure was “We Have it Now!” — and, evidently, Great Western *did* have it then!

Standard equipment for the .44 Magnum Blackhawk included a 6½-inch barrel, fluted cylinder, and walnut grips for a list price of \$96. Old Model (large frame) Blackhawks were also offered in .41 Magnum (from 1965 to 1973), .30 Carbine (1968 to 1973), and in .45 Colt (from 1971 to 1972). The .357 Magnum version was a flattop from 1955 to 1962, then, in 1963, the sight “humps” appeared. All .357 Magnums from 1955 to 1973 were of the mid-sized frame variety. It was absent from the lineup for a number of decades, until the mid-frame reappeared as a New Model Flattop as a Distributor Exclusive.

The Ubiquitous .44 Remington Magnum

I know what you're thinking: Did he fire six shots or only five? Well, to tell you the truth, in all this excitement, I've kinda lost track myself. But being this is a .44 Magnum, the most powerful handgun in the world, and would blow your head clean off, you've got to ask yourself one question: Do I feel lucky? Well, do ya, punk?

It's been more than four decades since "Dirty Harry" Callahan uttered those ominous words in the 1971 film classic, *Dirty Harry*. So many years, so much water under the bridge, and so many calibers later, is the .44 Remington Magnum still relevant, or has it been swept into the dustbin of obsolescence with the advent of many new and more powerful cartridges?

A little history. The term "magnum" was first used commercially on the legendary .357 Magnum, introduced in 1935. It was, essentially, a .38 Special on steroids. While the .357 is the cat's meow for defensive purposes, it leaves one wanting more for big game.

Before the .44 Magnum came to fruition, big-bore handgunners resorted to hot-loading commercial offerings in .44 Special and .45 Colt. But early production revolvers often lacked heat-treating, and the results were handguns that came apart to the detriment of the shooter. Gun writer Elmer Keith was just one of those seeking more power, and he was inspirational in the creation of the now legendary .44 Remington Magnum. In 1956, the .44 Magnum was unleashed, with the introduction of Smith & Wesson's double-action Model 29 and Ruger's single-action Blackhawk revolvers — and the shooting world hasn't been the same since.

No handgun cartridge up to that time could come close to matching the sheer power of the .44 Remington Magnum. Early factory ammo was hot — much hotter than it is today. Gun scribe

Brian Pearce acquired a case of vintage Remington 240-grain semi-jacketed hollowpoint ammo, circa 1957, for an article in the October 2009 issue of *Handloader* magazine. The ammunition was tested in two pre-Model 29 Smith & Wesson revolvers with 6½-inch barrels, and the chronograph revealed an average of 1,451 fps! The recoil was fierce, the noise deafening.

Like many endeavors, the .44 Magnum fell victim to the game of one-upmanship. In 1983, the Freedom Arms Model 83 was introduced in Dick Casull's hot-rodged .45-caliber cartridge, the raucous .454 Casull. Casull's .454 was finally legitimized as the hottest commercial five-shot revolver round available, after decades of experimentation and development (and a few blown-up guns, I might add). The .454 represented a whole new level of revolver power, making the .44 Magnum pale in comparison.

Other manufacturers like Ruger (with its .454 as the lone six-shot to ever make production), and Taurus followed suit years later. It seemed the .44 Magnum was officially unseated as the most powerful handgun round. Or was it?

Creating a more powerful round isn't necessarily a difficult task, but finding folks capable of competently shooting Dick Casull's high-pressure wonder cartridge is a different story altogether, something to consider. (If you've ever shot a .454, you know what I'm talking about.) Shortly after the .454's debut, Montana gun builder John Linebaugh unleashed the .500 and .475 Linebaughs on the world, and masochistic big-bore handgun fans worldwide had something truly fierce to cringe about.

Let's step back for a moment and take a look at the .44 Remington Magnum. The .44 Magnum is actually .429-caliber, but can you

imagine the street cred of a cartridge called the “.429 Magnum?” Just doesn’t sound right. Anyway, the case length is a nominal 1.285 inches, with an overall length of 1.61 inches. The maximum SAAMI spec pressure is 36,000 psi. Any and all factory-chambered .44 Magnums will safely chamber and fire the much milder .44 Special, which is a great option when teaching a shooter new to larger calibers.

The new millennium ushered in a whole slew of big handgun cartridges that easily eclipse the paper ballistics of the .44 Remington Magnum, including the .480 Ruger, .460 Smith & Wesson Magnum, .500 JRH, and the new heavyweight champ, the .500 Smith & Wesson Magnum. But big cartridges require big revolvers, limiting the usefulness of both. They are bulky, heavy, and kick fiercely. They are not for everyone.

To this day, the .44 Magnum is a “threshold” cartridge, meaning that it is the upper limit for all but the most hardened handgunner and one that neophytes need to approach with caution. Regardless, one testament to the popularity of this caliber is the sheer volume of the variety of ammunition available for the .44 Magnum. Nearly all major ammunition manufacturers offer a number of loads in .44 Remington magnum, as do a number of smaller specialty manufacturers like CorBon, Buffalo Bore, Double Tap Ammunition, and the Grizzly Cartridge Company, which offer superb loads specifically for big-game hunting. From shotshells to heavy hardcast bullets, the .44 has been loaded for virtually every task for which a revolver can be called upon.

The .44 Magnum can be had in firearms available from Smith & Wesson, Sturm, Ruger & Company, Magnum Research, Uberti,

Taurus, and Freedom Arms. Judging by the new offerings from all these manufacturers, the .44 Remington Magnum remains very popular. Yet some would ask, is the .44 Magnum still relevant? I say yes, by virtue of its sheer popularity, practicality, and capability. Loaded properly, it will get nearly any job done. So, if you feel the desire to hunt big game with a revolver or you feel the need to carry a sidearm for wild animal defense, you would be well served by the legendary .44 Remington Magnum.

SPECIFICATIONS:	
Bullet Diameter:	.429-inch
Case Length:	1.285 inches
Overall Length:	1.610 inches
Maximum Pressure:	36,000 psi



Author Photo



Photo by Lee Martin

The Old Model Super Blackhawk .44 Magnum.

The Super Blackhawk

John Dougan once succinctly stated, “Few Ruger single-action revolvers offer the elegance and visual impact of the early Super Blackhawk, as it is visually tasteful and well proportioned. This was Ruger’s *highest quality* revolver.” Heralded by Dougan as Ruger’s “most exciting single-action model,” the Super Blackhawk made its debut, in 1959. The Super Blackhawk is the only model that has never been in any caliber other than .44 Remington Magnum.

Four changes separated the Super Blackhawk from its predecessor, the .44 Magnum Blackhawk. Evidently, there were more than a few complaints about the recoil exhibited in the first iteration, the flattop Blackhawk .44,

that Ruger decided to do something about it. The improvements made came in the form of the Super Blackhawk.

The grip frame, the main culprit, was made larger in the old Colt Dragoon style, and it was made of steel, instead of the previous aluminum alloy. More changes included a wide trigger and hammer, and the top of the frame was modified to more or less encapsulate the rear sight, with ribs on both sides to protect it. Gone was the standard (and rather odd) 6½-inch barrel in favor of a 7½-inch tube. The fluted cylinder also went by the wayside, in its stead a smooth-sided cylinder. Last, the Super Blackhawk was fitted with a wide spur target hammer and a corresponding wide serrated trigger. Strangely enough, the Blackhawk Flattop .44 Magnum and the Super Blackhawk were simultaneously produced until 1963 when the .44 Flattop was dropped from production.

The .30 Carbine

Some find it more than a little odd that Ruger has chambered revolvers past and the present in the .30 Carbine cartridge. Ruger chambered its wheelguns in this diminutive rifle round for two reasons. First, it wanted to capitalize on the growing interest in small-caliber, high-velocity handguns (pioneering handgun hunter Al Georg did much to push this trend). Manufacturers responded with the .256 Win. Mag. Hawkeye and Smith & Wesson's .22 Jet, but these rounds functioned less than spectacularly (the Hawkeye was a flop and the .22 Jet was unreliable). The .30 Carbine filled some of that void. Second, surplus .30 Carbine ammunition was bountiful and cheap to buy in bulk, cutting down shooting costs.

The .30 Carbine is the result of the U.S. Ordnance Department's efforts to create a new "light rifle" round, in 1940. It was intended to

be a cartridge/rifle combination that would provide rear echelon military personnel with more firepower and accuracy potential than that provided by the standard U.S military sidearm of the time, the M1911A1 .45 ACP semi-automatic pistol. (The .30 Carbine's role actually expanded well beyond the initial role envisioned by the U.S. Ordnance Department.) Another goal in its creation was to have a rifle that would weigh considerably less than the standard battle rifle of the United States, the M1 Garand.

Winchester developed the cartridge, which amounts to a more modern version of the .32 Winchester Self-Loading cartridge, but without a rim and in .30-caliber. In 1941, the semi-auto .30 M1 Carbine was officially adopted.

In 1963, the U.S. Government began releasing M1 Carbines to the public through the National Rifle Association (NRA), for around \$20. As a result, many M1 Carbines went into circulation, to be used by thousands of sportsmen around the nation. The little rifle/cartridge combination was *instantly* popular. This contributed greatly to Ruger's decision to chamber its popular single-action Blackhawk to the dainty rifle round.



Photo by Lee Martin

A .30 Streaker conversion on a .30 Carbine Blackhawk. This is the original “fast .30” wildcat cartridge, as designed by Bob Rayzak in the mid-1970s. This one was built by the Lee Martins.

The Blackhawk is a platform that lends itself well to the .30 Carbine, but the same almost begs for an increase in power. A gunsmith by the name of Bob Rayzak recognized this potential. Rayzak was the developer of the wildcat cartridge the .30 Streaker, a round that amounts to a shortened .30 Herrett. He found the .30 Streaker was easily adapted to the .30 Carbine Blackhawk, necessitating a minimum of modifications to do so. The conversion involves nothing more than a re-chamber of the existing cylinder, a low-cost, low-effort conversion that pays dividends. How much of an increase are we looking at? Where the .30 Carbine maxes out at about 1,500 fps with a 110-grain bullet, the .30 Streaker is just getting warmed up; the .30 Streaker will stretch its legs to the tune of 2,000 fps with a 110-grain bullet! While similar .30-caliber wildcats have been developed over the years, the original “fast .30” Blackhawk dates back to Bob Rayzak and the mid-1970s.

Note: Great Western was the first revolver manufacturer to offer a .30 Carbine single-action, but production was very low.

SPECIFICATIONS:	
Bullet Diameter:	.308-inch
Case Length:	1.290 inches
Overall Length:	1.650 inches
Maximum Pressure:	38,500 psi



Photo by Lee Martin

An Old Model .41 Magnum Blackhawk, from 1965.



Photo by Lee Martin

An Old Model .357 Magnum/9mm Blackhawk convertible, circa 1969.



Photo by Lee Martin

An Old Model .30 Carbine Blackhawk, from 1969.



Photo by Lee Martin

An Old Model .357 Magnum Blackhawk.



Photo by Lee Martin



Photo by Lee Martin

The New Model revolvers (top) have two pins in the place of the three screws of the Old Model, such as the Old Model Blackhawk above. Thus, that older generation of guns are also known as “Three Screws.”



A 1967 Old Model Blackhawk convertible, in .357 Magnum and 9mm, with a 6½-inch barrel.



An Old Model Blackhawk in .30 Carbine, with a 7½ inch barrel, circa 1972.



Photo by Lee Martin

A standard blued New Model .41 Magnum Blackhawk

New Model Blackhawk

The essence of the New Model designation is the patented transfer bar safety system and loading gate arrangement (again, more details on the mechanicals of the transfer bar will be covered in [Chapter Five](#)). Gone were the three frame screws and the familiar clickity-clack ratchet of the hammer and the turning of the cylinder that defined the single-actions of a bygone era.

Introduced in 1973 and available in .357 Magnum (interchangeable with the .38 Special), .30 Carbine, .41 Magnum, .45 ACP, and .45 Colt, there were also convertible models with extra cylinders in .357 Magnum and 9mm Parabellum, and .45 Colt and .45 ACP. A number of barrel lengths were available from 4 $\frac{5}{8}$, 5 $\frac{1}{2}$, 6 $\frac{1}{2}$, and 7 $\frac{1}{2}$ inches, but how they were offered varied by caliber. Walnut grips were standard, Goncalo Alves grips were

first listed in 1988, and rosewood grips were available by 1994. Two finishes were available: blued steel with an anodized aluminum grip and ejector rod housing, while stainless steel became available in 1974, a year after the New Model came into being.



Photo by Lee Martin

A New Model .357 Magnum Blackhawk.



A 50th Anniversary New Model .357 Magnum Flattop Blackhawk, with custom grips by Mike Giboney.



Photo by David Bradshaw

An engraved convertible Blackhawk in .45 Colt/.45 ACP, with action tuning by David Bradshaw.



A 50th Anniversary New Model .357 Magnum Flattop Blackhawk, with custom grips by Mike Giboney.



Photo by Lee Martin

A stainless Super Blackhawk in .44 Magnum.

New Model Super Blackhawk

Like all New Models, the New Model Super Blackhawk was introduced in 1973, chambered in the powerful .44 Remington Magnum. The non-fluted cylinder was a six-shot, and available barrel lengths were 4⁵/₈, 5¹/₂, 7¹/₂, and 10¹/₂ inches.

The 10¹/₂-inch model made its debut, in 1983. It was special in that it was specifically slated for competing in metallic silhouette, coming equipped with an undercut front sight and the long ejector rod housing off the Ruger .357 Maximum revolver (at the suggestion of David Bradshaw). It was a big success on the metallic silhouette competition circuit. Standard grip

material was walnut, but, at some point, both Goncalo Alves and laminated wood grips were available. Blued steel or stainless steel with a soft satin finish were available, and a high-polish stainless steel was later offered. The unique Dragoon-style grip frame with the square-back triggerguard was unique to the Super Blackhawk and is a feature that remains to this day.

A One-Of-A-Kind Factory Ruger Revolver

By David Bradshaw

Author's Note: Photos with Rugermobile taken in New Hampshire, in 2006. Broke the grip not long after the "Ruger 03" was made in May-July 2003. The appellation "Ruger 03" is the mine.

As the .357 Maximum passed from development to production, in 1982, Bill Ruger, Jr., asked me if there was a gun in the Ruger lineup that I'd like to have. There was SRM-4, which had been consigned to me in 1981 and had since been returned. Hardly a catalog item, SRM-4 would be the cat's meow.

"No, thank you," I said.

The 10½-inch Super Blackhawk, a.k.a. "Silhouette Super," had written revolver history. The .357 Maximum stood poised to carve its own trail and shake a few trees along the way. (Arriving a few months later, hot on the heels of the Maximum, Ruger's first stainless Super, the KS411N, blasted into the record book in the summer of 1983.) Time went on. The idea of a personal commemorative Ruger lay in my mind, like the breath of a hibernating bear.

Cut forward to New Braunfels, Texas, early 2003. We're shooting the .500 Linebaugh with John Linebaugh and knife maker Jerry Halrich. There is talk of factory Rugers, specifically, the absence of a short-barrel Bisley with adjustable sights.

"Accusport has a limited run of Bisleys, .45s with 5½-inch barrels," says Halrich.

Back in Louisiana, a call to the distributor, Accusport, reveals there's a special order of 700 Bisleys in .45 Colt and another 500 Bisleys in .44 Mag. They are stainless, with 5½-inch barrels. I order one in .45 Colt.

The limited edition Bisley is visually out of balance, yet cylinder frame and grip are ripe to become the pistol hibernating in my mind. I visit Bill Ruger, Jr., in May 2003. I ask him if he will perform a few modifications to the Bisley, specifically:

- Super Redhawk front sight.
- Maximum (long) ejector, shortened a ¼-inch.
- Fit convertible (blue) .45 ACP cylinder.
- Non-fluted Colt cylinder; fluted ACP cylinder, to instantly identify by eye or touch which cylinder is in the revolver.
- Shorten forcing cone.
- Eliminate end-shake.
- Minimize cylinder/barrel gap.

Ruger agrees, says, "Come to the plant tomorrow. Take your revolver to Dick Beaulieu in Service. He'll be expecting you."

Beaulieu mocked up a model: unfinished Blackhawk cylinder frame; 5½-inch barrel; long ejector housing; and Super Redhawk sight held to the barrel with scotch tape.

“Looks good,” says Beaulieu. “Take it to Bill. See what he says.”

Shortly after my return to Vermont, Dick Beaulieu calls. “David, if you want the blue .45 ACP cylinder, we’ll do it. But Bill and I talked it over, and we want to make a stainless .45 ACP cylinder for your revolver.”

“By all means,” I replied. I’d figured blue, because blue was standard on the Blackhawk Convertible and wouldn’t require making a special cylinder. But, of course, stainless belongs on stainless.



Photo by David Bradshaw

David Bradshaw had this Bisley Blackhawk built to his specifications by the Ruger factory. Here it is seen in .45 ACP trim.

“Good,” says Beaulieu. “And I went ahead and fitted a new barrel, drilled for the shortened long ejector. There won’t be any mistaking

provenance. New parts will include the barrel, ejector assembly, front sight, and both cylinders.”

There are a few other mods. Chamber throats are polished to .451-inch. The crown is slightly different. I met with Beaulieu in early July to pick up the revolver.

“I see you had a Ron Power free-spin pawl in the box,” he says. “I put it back in. Figured you wanted it.”

I turned the revolver in my hands — just beautiful — and thanked him.

“Bill asked that you meet him in his office,” says Beaulieu. “Don’t forget your gun!”

The revolver passes around the front offices, an eyeball magnet. Bill Ruger, Jr., turns it over in his hands and nods. I hand it to Ruger’s secretary, Brenda. Brenda had been at Sturm, Ruger for years; she started out checkering the walnut for Model 77 rifles. Brenda gazes approvingly at the revolver in her hands, looks up at me.

“David,” she says, “You now have a factory one-of-a-kind Ruger.”



Photo by David Bradshaw

The Ruger 03 makes for a great hood ornament!



Photo by David Bradshaw

Sporting its .45 Colt cylinder, Bradshaw's "03" returns great accuracy, as evidenced by this 100-yard group. (Let's not forget that Bradshaw is an exceptional shooter.)



Photo by David Bradshaw

An SBH customized to Bradshaw specs, next to a dinner of moose steak, with salad from the organic garden.

The .357 Maximum Blackhawk: The SRM

The .357 Maximum by Ruger was a revolver that started life as a New Model Blackhawk. The cylinder and frame were lengthened to accommodate the longer .357 Maximum cartridge (the case is a full 1.6 inches). The ejector rod housing and the ejector rod were also lengthened one inch, at the request of David Bradshaw, for the stretched .357. The Dragoon-style grip frame was used on the Maximum, just like the one on the Super Blackhawk .44 Magnum, and is replete with the square-back triggerguard. As far as barrel lengths were concerned, 7½- and 10½-inch barrels were the only options available.

This revolver was designed for metallic silhouette competition, where the extra knockdown power of the new cartridge was a welcome feature. A secondary role for the new Ruger .357 Maximum was handgun hunting, hence the 7½-inch barreled version, for easier carry in the field. The Ruger Maximum was released in conjunction with Remington Arms Company's factory loads in the new caliber, in 1982. Shortly after, Remington also released its .357 Maximum ammunition with a 180-grain JHP.

Within a mere one year of production, the Maximum was dropped from Ruger's lineup, barrel and topstrap erosion problems from the high-pressure cartridge having been cited. It has been suggested that erosion only reared its head, when handloaders began loading light bullets at high velocities. It pays to remember that the .357 Maximum was designed to match the .357 Magnum's velocities with heavier bullets, but was not intended to become a varmint cartridge.

A total of 16,314 RSMs were produced, of which nearly 5,000 were scrapped when they were recalled by Ruger, at least as near as my research tells me. By March 1983, Ruger's .357 Maximum Blackhawk ceased to be produced.



Author Photo

The Super Blackhawk .44 Magnum cylinder is to the right of a .357 Maximum cylinder. You can clearly see how much the cylinder had to be lengthened to accommodate the longer .357 Maximum cartridge.



Photo by David Bradshaw

The first production .357 Maximum, serial number 018, was given to David Bradshaw.



STURM, RUGER & Company, Inc.

SOUTHPORT, CONNECTICUT 06490 U.S.A.

TELEPHONE: (203) 259-7843 TWX: 710 459-3029

April 11, 1983

Dear Ruger Dealer:

We have temporarily stopped shipping Ruger Blackhawk SRM .357 Remington Maximum Single Action Revolvers because extended testing in the last few months has revealed some problems related to erosion in the breech and forcing cone of the barrel, and on the underside of the top strap of the frame, just over the barrel-cylinder gap.

Revolvers which have been fired thousands of rounds exhibit a narrow cut line in the underside of the frame top strap just over the barrel gap. This "cut" will generally become apparent in a few hundred rounds, and will increase in depth to as much as .015" to .020" after a few thousand rounds. However, continued firing does not increase the depth of this cut beyond .015" to .020". We believe that this cut is caused by mechanical abrasion of the frame by high velocity gases and particles, primarily unburned powder. So far as we have been able to determine, this cut does not affect the safety or serviceability of the revolver, and is probably only detrimental as an appearance factor. Nevertheless, we wish to evaluate the situation more fully, including possible design changes to eliminate or reduce this effect.

Similarly, erosion at the breech end of the barrel and in the forcing cone becomes apparent after a few hundred rounds, and becomes severe enough after a few thousand rounds to gradually degrade accuracy and cause increased spitting of unburned powder, gases, lead, and gilding metal from the barrel-cylinder gap. This increased spitting from the barrel-cylinder gap may pose an increased hazard to bystanders positioned close beside or slightly in front of the shooter, and to both shooters and bystanders who fail to use eye protection. We are now in the process of evaluating design and material changes to eliminate or reduce this barrel erosion problem and its consequences.

The Ruger Blackhawk SRM breaks new ground in the use of high pressure, high power revolver cartridges. As in any product at the leading edge of its relevant technology, continued research and product experience leads the way towards higher levels of performance and longevity. We at Sturm, Ruger feel strongly that the few weeks delay in shipping the new Blackhawk SRM .357 Remington Maximum revolvers will, in the end, be to the benefit of our distributors, our dealers, and most importantly, to our friends, the shooters, to whom all of our best efforts are, and will continue to be, directed.

Yours truly,
STURM, RUGER & Company, Inc.

William B. Ruger, Jr.
Senior Vice President, Manufacturing

Author Photo

The recall letter, by Ruger, for its .357 Maximums.



Author Photo

Ruger's Bisley Hunter, a .44 Magnum designed for hunting. It has provisions for mounting a scope on the ribbed, 7½-inch barrel.

The New Model Super Blackhawk Hunter

Introduced in 1992, the Super Blackhawk Hunter in .44 Magnum with a 7½-inch barrel and an integral, full-length solid rib machined for scope rings represents Ruger's clear dedication to handgun hunting. Indeed, it designated a number of models with the *express* purpose of hunting. The gun was made available with two distinctly different grip frames. The Blackhawk Hunter features a Dragoon-style grip (but without the square-back triggerguard of the standard Super Blackhawk), and the Bisley Hunter is equipped with, you guessed it, a Bisley grip frame.

A significant feature of the Super Blackhawk Hunter that sets it apart from other single-action revolvers is the integral scope mount. It wasn't something really new for Ruger, as it had incorporated integral mounting points on a number of other revolvers such as the Redhawk, with mounting provisions on the barrel, and as they came on the Super Redhawk with its mounting points on the frame (and, thus, the extension that frame was

equipped with). Bill Ruger, Jr., wanted to do something different with the Hunter series of revolvers.



Photo by Lee Martin

A first-year (1986) Bisley in .44 Magnum.



Photo by Keane Zerangue

Keane Zerangue owns this 5½-inch stainless steel Ruger .45 Colt/.45ACP convertible Bisley, on which he's had some custom work done. His goal was to customize it with many of the same features of David Bradshaw's Ruger 03, which had been custom made for him at the Ruger factory. The work was done by Scott McInnis, of Shreveport, Louisiana, who silver-soldered Jim Stroh's Alpha Precision front sight on the barrel, fitted a Bowen Target Rear sight, and installed a Ruger long ejector rod and housing. The .45 Colt cylinder was reamed to .4525-inch, the forcing cone was recut, and a blued locking Belt Mountain base pin was installed. Scott also performed a trigger job, polished the internals, and fitted a free-spin pawl. A new set of grips are in the making. Keane's goal is to take deer, hogs, and other game and shoot long-range with it.



Photo by David Bradshaw

A Bisley .44 Magnum with a 7½-inch barrel.



Author Photo

The Ruger Bisley Hunter with an experimental finish called an “Ionbond Diamondblack” PVD coating.

Bill’s concept was to beef up the barrel with a rib on top that was big enough to accommodate the scope ring scallops used to locate an optic. A courser thread was also chosen with which to mount the barrel to the frame, thereby strengthening the barrel-to-frame relationship. The interchangeable front sight blade system was borrowed from the Redhawk, and the long

ejector rod housing and ejector rod were borrowed from the defunct parts bin of those that had last made an appearance on the .357 Maximum Blackhawk. Finally, since the revolver was slated for a life in the hunting fields, it was decided that be that the new Super Blackhawk Hunter should be constructed of the more element-resistant stainless steel, rather than blued steel.

Though a number of different calibers were eventually offered on the Super Blackhawk Hunter, to include the .41 Magnum and the .45 Colt, it began its career as a .44 Remington Magnum. As of this printing, that round remains the only caliber available.



Photo by John Parker

A Bisley in .475 Linebaugh, by Jack Huntington.

The Silhouette Super

By David Bradshaw

Ruger Senior invited me to the plant and his home, in New Hampshire, in 1978-'79, where he asked my two cents on introducing a longer barreled Super Blackhawk for busting steel in the yet-to-be-tamed handgun silhouette game. The "Old Man," as Bill Junior (and anyone in management I spoke with) referred to Ruger Senior (never within earshot, of course), introduced me to his sons and named Bill Junior as my primary contact at the company.

An intense observer of detail, Bill Senior himself was usually just a phone call away. Waves of blueprints, technical challenges, and business decisions continuously crested his brainpan. Against such tide, he's focus sharp as glass on the subject at hand. Bill Ruger, Sr., had become the main leader in applying lessons learned during World War II, to revitalize firearms manufacture in the United States. For the second half of the twentieth century, William B. Ruger was the closest the world would come to a second John Moses Browning.

Until the arrival of the 10½-inch "Silhouette Super," I alternated between the Smith & Wesson Model 29 with an 8⅜-inch barrel and a Super Blackhawk with a 7½-inch barrel. At the release of the 10½-inch Super Blackhawk, Bill Ruger, Jr., sent me two. I scoped one with a Leupold 4x IER (intermediate eye relief) scope, leaving the other stock for steel shooting. I predicted the new Super would rip up the firing line.

In 1980, the first International Revolver Championship was held. As the match date approached, I grew apprehensive of the heavily

eroded forcing cone on my Silhouette Super. I feared the funnel of erosion on the barrel face (the forcing cone itself does not burn away), might spoil accuracy. I drove to Newport, New Hampshire, and gave the revolver to Ruger Junior with a request that the barrel be set back to eliminate forcing cone erosion. “Whatever you do, do *not* replace the barrel!” He took it to Southport, Connecticut, where the barrel was set back, with the threads perfectly timed, etc., and the revolver was quickly returned. I barely had time to check my sight dope and head to the Internationals.

When I called Bill Junior to thank him for removing the erosion and setting the barrel back, he said, “By the way, we installed a new cylinder.”

“*What? A new cylinder? What if the chambers didn’t track?*” I searched the box. There lay my old cylinder under the inside flap in the yellow and black cardboard box — *with the ratchet hub milled off!*

When I arrived at the 1980 Internationals, a great tournament run under the IHMSA (International Handgun Metallic Silhouette Association) Region One director Ron Ricci, I rounded up Kim Kirschner (to act as a spotter) and put the hammer down at Dick Riley’s range in New Hampshire. (Dick Riley owned a gun shop and range on which he hosted excellent handgun silhouette matches. Riley later served a stint as NRA director.) I had to know the revolver was accurate before the match — and by accurate, I mean five shots in five inches at 200 meters from a stock Super Blackhawk with iron sights. My sight dope checked out, with good center hits toppling the iron. Kim Kirschner, who spotted for her champion husband, Allen, had set the spotting scope as close to the bore axis as possible, the mark of a real spotter. To end the session, I set up a bank of turkey

plates (164 yards), and lowered the rear sight a click or two. That was the old Ruger elevation screw, with an eight-click per revolution dial, which I trust as more consistent than the replacement 16-click screw.

“Watch the leg,” I said. *Boom!* — clank! And so it went, four shots, four turkey legs. “That’s it,” I said. “This Super Blackhawk is ready!”

And it was. This revolver went on to win the first International Revolver Championship and collect Top Revolver trophies from Smith & Wesson, Hornady, Ruger, and Federal.

The “Silhouette Super” Blackhawk had completely turned the tide in revolver competition.



Author Photo

This is an example of the 10½-inch Super Blackhawk that Ruger made for steel silhouette competition. The author used it to take this North Carolina wild sow, stoking it with Hornady 300-grain XTPs. The revolver belongs to Jim Miner.

John Taffin and the “Perfect Packin’ Pistol”

One cannot even begin thinking about the ideal size, shape, and configuration of a revolver without a nod to John Taffin and the concept he laid out and refined, the “Perfect Packin’ Pistol.” Taffin was definitely onto something, with this concept of the perfect revolver.

Now, everyone has their own preferences, tolerances, likes, and dislikes, so for every individual the Perfect Packin' Pistol is subjective. For me, it has to have a barrel that isn't too long, in order to balance well, and open iron sights, preferably a rear sight by Hamilton Bowen. It absolutely has to carry well on the hip, even though it may actually ride in a shoulder/chest rig. The grip must be comfortable and up to the task of taming the recoil of the revolver. It has to return reasonable accuracy, but I am not looking for benchrest groups. Lastly, it has to be chambered in a round that is fully capable of taking down any animal I may come in contact with, and it must be larger in diameter than a .40-caliber; recoil shouldn't be so debilitating that the gun is hard to control and even less fun to shoot. I am partial to the old warhorse .45 Colt, its modern iteration, not your great-great grandfather's .45. Oh, it doesn't hurt one bit if my perfect packin' pistol looks decent, as well.

Does the Perfect Packin' Pistol exist in factory format? I am sure one could order the perfect specimen from one of the boutique revolver manufacturers that offer enough options to perfectly outfit your personal revolver. But what about mass-produced factory guns?



Photo by Chris Magera

I found my Perfect Packin' Pistol in the Ruger catalog, though it is a distributor exclusive, one built for Williams Shooters Supply. This particular revolver is a Bisley with a 5½ inch barrel, chambered in my favorite all-around cartridge, the .45 Colt.

How well do I like it? All I can say is that it *should* be a regular catalog item. Conversations with decision makers at Ruger left me optimistic this configuration will indeed be offered as a regular

catalog item at a later date. Why? The 5½-inch .45 Colt Bisley is the best configured revolver to come down a production line, any production line, in a very long time. The barrel length, for me at least, is the best compromise in sight radius and convenience, convenient in that it can be very comfortably worn in a belt holster. But the perfection doesn't end there. The Bisley grip frame, as interpreted and contrived by Ruger, is simply the best grip design and profile ever made for heavily recoiling revolvers — period. Gun builder Hamilton Bowen will not even build the calibers .475 Linebaugh and up on a standard plow handle grip frame. Folks sometimes complain about getting the middle knuckle on their shooting hand bashed by the triggerguard of the Bisley under recoil, and while I can honestly report that this sometimes happens to me, it isn't a deal breaker. The Bisley provides a sizeable increase in control over the various iterations of the plow handle design, and that's good enough for me, slightly bruised knuckle included.



Author Photo

The author's Perfect Packin' Pistol is this Ruger Bisley in .45 Colt and sporting a 5½-inch barrel. It is most often carried in this 7x Leather chest rig and stoked with Grizzly Cartridge's 335-grain WLN load.

From day one, this revolver has proven to be a shooter with all of the factory fodder it has been fed, to include some pretty heavy loads in the 30,000 psi range (a safe level for the Bisley). A load I have grown particularly fond of is a 335-grain WLN (Wide Long Nose) load from the Grizzly Cartridge Company. This load has clocked a consistent 1,300-plus fps from my 5½-inch Bisley and delivered groups under two inches at 50 yards. So far it has claimed the life of one North Carolina wild hog, the 335-grain bullet making short work of the 250-pound hog. I hope to put it on more and larger

game in the future, because the more I carry this revolver, the more I like it. For me at least, it is the Perfect Packin' Pistol.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE SINGLE-ACTIONS PART II





Author Photo

This matched set, consecutively serial numbered, .357 Magnum Vaqueros, owned by Drew Koval, features color case hardening and faux ivory grips.



Author Photo

The Vaquero differs from its sibling Blackhawk in its rounded topstrap and fixed sights.



Photo by Lee Martin

A .45 Colt Vaquero, circa 1999.



Photo by Thomas Kelly

This JRH-built Vaquero in .480 Ruger was originally commissioned by John Sparkman. It is now owned by Thomas Kelly.



A .44-40 Vaquero, circa 1994.

The Vaquero

The single-action Vaquero made its debut, in 1993. The Vaquero introduced classic, distinctly western styling, with a rounded-off topstrap (like the granddaddy Colt Single Action Army) and fixed sights. Essentially a fixed-sighted version of the New Model Blackhawk, it was available from birth in stainless or blued steel. Three different barrel lengths were available: 4 $\frac{5}{8}$, 5 $\frac{1}{2}$, and 7 $\frac{1}{2}$ inches. Originally introduced in .45 Colt, in 1993, the next year .44-40 and .44 Magnum were added to the Vaquero line of revolvers. The Vaquero has a six-round capacity and was eventually superseded by the “New Vaquero,” but more on that later.



Photo by Lee Martin

A New Model Vaquero in .44-40 with bird's-head grip frame.

In 1997, the Bisley version of the Vaquero was added, featuring the wonderful Bisley grip frame adorned with Rosewood grip panels, a 5½-inch barrel, and chambered in both .45 Colt and .44 Remington Magnum. This eye-catching revolver was finished in case color hardening, with a blued steel barrel and cylinder.

In 2001, a Bird's Head Vaquero was added, featuring, of course, bird's head grip frame. Available in both blued and stainless steel, the gun came in .45 Colt with a 5½-inch barrel. A 3¾-inch barreled model (also in .45 Colt) was then added with black Micarta grips and, then, 2003, a .357 Magnum version was added that could be had with black Micarta or simulated ivory grips.

The New Vaquero

There's lots of confusion about the introduction of the "New Vaquero," which succeeded the Vaquero, which was based on a New Model Blackhawk. Are you confused yet?

The New Vaquero is a mid-frame revolver that replaced the old Vaquero, in 2005. Chambered in .357 Magnum or .45 Colt, the color case hardened finished or stainless steel revolver features an XR3-style grip frame and black checkered grips, with the option of a 4⁵/₈-, 5¹/₂-, or 7¹/₂-inch barrel (save for the .357 Magnum version, which is only available with the shorter two barrels).

The New Model Bisley Vaquero

This is the same mid-frame revolver as the New Vaquero, save, now, for the Bisley grip frame and Bisley hammer and trigger. It became available in .357 Magnum or .45 Colt, with a 5¹/₂-inch barrel, simulated ivory grip panels, fixed sights, a six-shot cylinder, and in case color hardening or stainless steel.

While I like Vaqueros both new and old, I find its fixed sights are a limitation. You really have to work your loads to find what will work with sights that cannot be adjusted. Many folks adjust the elevation by modifying the front sight height. For me, I'll take mine with adjustable sights.

The Iconic .45 Colt

Born in 1873, this old blackpowder warhorse cartridge is rarely loaded to potential from the factory, because of the number of older non-Ruger revolvers in circulation that are incapable of handling the higher pressure, modern smokeless loads. Such modern rounds

would most likely reduce them to shrapnel. Therefore, due to liability issues and a quest for safety, the .45 Colt is rarely ever viewed in the same vein as the .44 Remington Magnum.

No slouch in blackpowder form, which slings 250-grain lead bullets at nearly 1,000 fps, the .45 Colt in modern times really takes on a different persona. Even the .45 ACP was designed to mimic the old Colt's ballistics in a semi-auto platform, so significant was its terminal performance and reputation as a stopping round.

I would argue that it was Ruger's ultra-strong production revolvers that breathed new life into the aging .45 Colt, making it possible for the handloader to extract a whole lot more out of the round. Sure, the custom option existed, and pioneers like Dick Casull and John Linebaugh had been injecting the .45 Colt with steroids for years, but now there was a platform from a factory that could live, all day long, ingesting loads that would make a Single Action Army whimper.

Gun scribe Ross Seyfried is also a big fan of the .45 Colt and chose that caliber to use against a Cape buffalo, in the mid-1980s. Ross evidently had a great deal of confidence in the capabilities of this round (when loaded to potential), as well as his own capabilities on the trigger. Ross was an exceptional shot with a handgun. In an article in *Handloader* magazine, while discussing the merits of the .44 Magnum, Ross stated, "I began to work in Africa. It was a handgunner's paradise. Plenty of deer- and elk-like critters could be stalked to within honest handgun range. Many could be taken with the .44 Magnum, but I always felt like I was asking a boy to do a man's job." Almost losing a trophy kudu shot with his trusty .44 Magnum further exposed that round as underachiever of sorts, one

that was somewhat marginal when the game got a bit larger. Ross' confidence in the .44 Magnum took a hit.

About this time, a gentleman by the name of John Linebaugh began pestering Seyfried with letters and phone calls touting the .45 Colt as a significant step up and over the legendary .44 Magnum. The two ultimately met, and Linebaugh offered Ross the chance to shoot his .45 Colt over the chronograph. Ross politely declined, stepping back an adequate distance and taking cover, as he fully expected the revolver to come apart like a hand grenade in John Linebaugh's hands. But the chronograph told the story — the true story — six times in a row, the 310-grain bullets traveling at 1,500 fps. Remarkable! The biggest shock came when Ross, expecting to pound the surely mangled cartridge cases out of their chambers, was able to lift them out with minimal effort.

Linebaugh was definitely on to something, and Seyfried immediately commissioned him to build him one of these super .45 Colts. As for my love affair with this cartridge, I figure what's good enough for Ross Seyfried and John Linebaugh is certainly good enough for me (and anyone else, for that matter!).

I am not advocating turning the .45 Colt into a .454 Casull, even though it can be loaded to give the much-vaunted .454 a run for the money and leave the .44 Magnum sucking wind in its rearview mirror. There's just no real need to push it that hard. Loaded to similar velocity and bullet weight levels as the .44 Magnum, the .45 Colt will run up to 20-percent less pressure, not to mention the fact that the .45 Colt can reliably utilize considerably heavier bullets than the .44 Magnum and still attain respectable velocities. If there is truly a do-it-all cartridge, the .45 Colt is at the top of the heap.

One need not load the .45 Colt to Casull levels to enjoy a leg-up in effectiveness. Loaded to much lower pressure levels, the .45 Colt will not leave the big-game handgun hunter needing more; the .45 Colt's diameter is large enough to guarantee a large wound channel by default. When your bullet starts out at nearly a half-inch in diameter, there is really no good reason to require expansion. Plus, at 30,000 psi, the new-age .45 Colt will sling a 335-grain hardcast bullet over 1,300 fps. That is *formidable* power. Even the standard bearer, the .44 Magnum, cannot reach these performance levels, without significantly higher pressures. On that note, it must be said that these are considered Ruger-only loads (to include BFRs and Freedom Arms revolvers), and they are *not* safe in Colt Single Action Army revolvers or the various facsimiles produced by a number of other companies. This level is still 35,000 psi shy of the .454 Casull. While recoil at these levels is sizeable, anyone who can handle a .44 Magnum can easily master the turbocharged .45 Colt.

SPECIFICATIONS:	
Bullet Diameter:	.452-inch
Case Length:	1.285 inches
Overall Length:	1.60 inches
Maximum Pressure:	14,000 psi

The Old Army

The predecessors of the famous cartridge-firing single-action revolvers we find so endearing were percussion, blackpowder, cap-and-ball revolvers. A blackpowder enthusiast, Bill Ruger, Sr., set out to build his own version of the dated cap-and-ball revolver, but he wanted something more than a

mere replica. With the brand already owning a reputation for over-engineering (read: superior strength), the new percussion revolver from Ruger would also have to possess exceptional strength, maintaining its topstrap (top portion of the frame), like all of Bill Senior's revolvers, which meant it would be a substantial gun. The new revolver was to be based on the Old Model Blackhawks produced from 1963 to 1972, retaining the action and grip frame of the Blackhawk.



Photo by Rob Millette

A Ruger Old Army blackpowder revolver in .45-caliber with a 7½-inch barrel and in blued steel.



A Ruger Old Army, circa 1974.



Photo by Mike Collings

An Old Army revolver in blued steel and with a 5½-inch barrel.

Unique to Ruger's modern version of the cap-and-ball revolver was a loading lever, rammer, and base pin, all linked together and set in place with one large screw. Another unique feature is a cylinder that is a casting, rather than one made from forged bar stock.

Released in 1972, in blued steel, followed later by a stainless steel version (1975), a 7½-inch barrel and adjustable sights were standard.

The 1990s saw a spike in the popularity of cowboy action competitions, which required more period-correct revolvers sporting fixed sights. Ruger responded to this need by producing Old Army percussion revolvers with fixed sights, a sort of "blackpowder Vaquero," if you will. Even the topstrap was rounded, *a lá* Vaquero, and the ramp-style front sight was replaced with a blade sight.

Three decades later, Ruger finally offers a shorter-barreled version, one at 5½ inches. This cap-and-ball, blackpowder percussion revolver is unique in a number of ways. Although based on the Old Model Blackhawk — the lockwork is of the old design, not the newer transfer bar system, and the grip frame is also of the old design — it takes its styling cues from the Remington Model 1858 cap-and-ball revolver.

Available in a decidedly modern stainless finish (both satin and polished), or in blued steel, the Old Army could be had with adjustable and fixed sights and a 5½- or 7½-inch barrel. All Old Armies are .45-caliber. Today, the Old Army cap-and-ball revolver is no longer in production.



Photo by Stan George

Stan George is the owner of this slick, custom .50-caliber Old Army that was built by Dave Clements, of Clements Custom Guns.



Photo by Stan George

Clements Custom Guns makes these Bisley hammers and triggers for Ruger Old Army cap-and-ball revolvers.



Photo by John C. Dougan, courtesy of Mowbray Publishers

Ruger's Hawkeye, showing the breechblock release.

The Hawkeye

Imagine if you will, a single-shot “revolver.” Well, not exactly a revolver, but a single-shot handgun built on a full-size single-action revolver frame, with a system resembling an artillery-like breechblock system. The cartridge this “revolver” was built around was the diminutive .256 Winchester Magnum centerfire, born from the parent case .357 Magnum and necked down to .25-caliber. This hyper-velocity varmint round is capable of achieving 2,300-plus fps with a 60-grain bullet.

The round was first tried on a Blackhawk revolver configuration, but the combination was found to be rather finicky. Unless the chambers were spotlessly clean, the shoulder would expand and push forward and the primer would protrude. It was quickly decided that a revolver was a poor

platform for this new cartridge. Plus, in testing, the single-shot delivered much better accuracy than its six-shot counterpart. Colt's, by the way, also tried the .256 in a converted Python and came to the same conclusion as had Ruger.



Photo by John C. Dougan, courtesy of Mowbray Publishers



Photo by John C. Dougan, courtesy of Mowbray Publishers

The other side of a Hawkeye.



Photo by John C. Dougan, courtesy of Mowbray Publishers

The Hawkeye, as it was christened, was introduced in 1963, but was only produced through the summer of 1964, July, to be exact, though occasional shipments continued all the way through the early 1970s. Only a few more than 3,000 units were produced, making them a highly sought-after collectible today. The Hawkeye was only offered with an 8½-inch barrel and with an adjustable rear sight.

The breechblock of the Hawkeye is rotated counter-clockwise to load a single round at a time directly into the barrel. The hammer will not cock until the breech is locked into its firing position. The trigger is also unable to be manipulated until the mechanism is locked, and, so, only when locked can the Hawkeye be fired.

While not technically a revolver, the Hawkeye is its very own category of uniqueness. Not a pistol, not a revolver, just a neat idea built on a revolver chassis.

Distributor Exclusive Revolvers

While Sturm, Ruger & Company does not have the distinction of being the only firearms manufacturer that produces distributor exclusive firearms, I believe that not one company offers nearly as many in this manner as does Ruger. This is not limited to handguns, as Ruger also manufactures quite a few No. 1s and 10/22s as special dealer exclusives. In the context of this book, I'm going to take a quick delve into a few of the more significant distributor-only revolver specials.

Ruger's dealer exclusive offerings began, in the late 1980s, with Buckeye Sporting Goods out of the Buckeye State, Ohio. A large mail order distributor, Buckeye Sporting Goods commissioned Ruger to build 5,000 .38-40/10mm convertible Blackhawks with 6½-inch barrels. It was an interesting revolver. The cylinder in .38-40 was fluted, while the modern cartridge chambering was smooth-sided.



Photo by Lee Martin

The Buckeye logo.



Photo by Lee Martin

A .32-20/.32 H&R Magnum convertible Buckeye dealer exclusive Blackhawk. This is a new-in-the-box revolver, one of 5,000 made.



Author Photo

A Williams Shooters Supply .45 Colt 5½-inch barrel Vaquero.



Photo by Lee Martin

This is a .38-40/10mm convertible Buckeye Sporting Goods dealer exclusive Blackhawk.



Photo by Lee Martin

This is a Talo Distributors, Inc., limited edition stainless .44 Special flattop. Just 1,000 of these were made.



Photo by Lee Martin

Here we have a Lipsey's blued .44 Special Mid-Frame Flattop. These later became standard catalog guns for the distributor.

In 1989, Ruger produced another Blackhawk convertible for Buckeye Sporting Goods, but this time in .32-20 and .32 H&R Magnum. This one also featured a 6½-inch barrel and had Buckeye's logo engraved in the topstrap.

In 1990, Talo Distributors, Inc., another Ruger dealer, commissioned Ruger to build it 1,200 .44-40/.44 Magnum Super Blackhawks. These revolvers were equipped with 7½-inch barrels and were made of blued steel.

Accusport commissioned Ruger, in 2002, to build one of my favorite configured revolvers, a 5½-inch barreled Bisley .45 Colt. The first run was 1,000 revolvers, but this particular configuration's popularity spurred multiple runs. Accusport also commissioned a .44 Magnum in the same configuration, as well as a .41 Magnum that saw multiple runs. Eventually, a convertible was offered in .45 Colt/.45 ACP.

Lipsey's got into the dealer exclusive game, in 2008, with a blued .44 Special Mid-frame Flattop revolver with either a 4⁵/₈- or a 5¹/₂-inch barrel. That one quickly sold out, prompting even more to be produced. Lipsey's sold so many, in fact, that this revolver configuration became a regular catalog item for it; Sturm, Ruger & Company listens to its customers. If a distributor exclusive sells well, there's a good chance it will end up in its catalog as a regular production item.

In 2009, Talo Distributors brought out the same .44 Special Mid-frame Flattop with a 4⁵/₈-inch barrel, but this one was in stainless steel.

A number of bigger Ruger distributors like Davidson's and Williams Shooters Supply have commissioned special runs of revolvers over the years. (I talk about my .45 Colt Bisley from Williams Shooters Supply in [Chapter Five](#) of this book, in some detail.) Two of Davidson's standout exclusives were its convertible Vaqueros, circa 2000 to 2001. They were stainless steel, with a 4⁵/₈- or 5¹/₂-inch barrel, chambered as a .38-40/.40 S&W, or as a .32-20/-.32 H&R Magnum. Both were really just a fixed sight version of the earlier Buckeye run.



Decades after the Mid-frame Flattop was discontinued, Ruger is building distributor exclusives like this .44 Special Flattop for Lipsey's. We have come full circle! *Photo by Doug Berry*



Author Photo

This 3 $\frac{3}{8}$ -inch short-barreled .44 Magnum belonging to Wes Daems was a Lipsey's distributor exclusive.



The "Toklat" is a dealer exclusive Super Redhawk built for use in Alaska, where the shortened barrel (five inches) makes for easy carry in the field.



Photo by Mike Giboney

The Accusport stainless steel Bisley in .45 Colt with a 5½-inch barrel. Grips are by Mike Giboney.

The .357 Maximum

By David Bradshaw

It's the Winter of 1980-'81, and I'm at dinner at Bill Ruger's New Hampshire home, a dairy barn reconstructed into a house, or else a high-ceilinged museum replete with dining facility, bar, and slate pool table surrounded by an arms collection on three sides, and Albert Bierstadt's huge painting of a giant sequoia. There's a walk-in fireplace, over whose mantle loomed a heavy, nineteenth-century elk rack. Rugers Senior and Junior have invited my participation in a new revolver development, "The .357 Maximum," said Bill Junior, having named it.

It was to be an elongated .357 Magnum of greater power, operating under greater pressure, for silhouette and hunting. It was also to be a revolver cartridge of lower recoil than the .44 Magnum. Ruger had already entered into collaboration with Remington for ammunition development.

As we shortly found, Remington was slower on the draw supplying experimental ammunition than Ruger was in prototyping the revolver. And whereas Remington experimental ammunition would, for the duration of development, emphasize velocity, my handloads (using fired prototype brass) favored momentum.

I was present at a later date, when Ruger Senior put the project in the hands of his son, who had given the .357 Maximum its name. Cartridge and chamber specifications would meet SAAMI (Sporting Arms and Ammunition Manufacturers Institute) approval as the .357 Remington Maximum.

The earliest Remington experimental ammunition was loaded with its own .357 158-grain JHP in a brass case 1.49 inches long; a long cylinder could and did handle that in a Blackhawk. Bill Junior quickly made up seven longer frame prototypes, which were serial numbered SRM-1 through SRM-7 (SRM standing for Sturm Ruger Maximum). I had asked Bill to lengthen the ejector assembly to completely clear the fired case, which he did. Bill was thinking of a case up to nearly 1.7 inches long.

To be clear, I did not work for Sturm, Ruger & Co. I was a marksman, there at the invite of the Rugers. As such, I had only minimal contact with employees. Nevertheless, it was apparent that very few inside the plant had any inkling of the Maximum.

Bill Junior fitted serial No. SRM-2 with 10 barrels, their twists ranging 1:10, 1:12, 1:14, 1:16, 1:18¾, 1:24, 1:32, 1:40, 1:48, and 1:60. I fired groups of 30 to 48 shots at 100 yards, noting each chamber. The most accurate twists with Remington's 158-grain JHP were 1:16 and 1:32. The 200-grain round-nose bullets stabilized fine in the 1:16 twist. The Hornady .358 Spire Point needed 1:14 for stability; this bullet is too long for the Maximum cylinder and, fired from a handgun, wrong for hunting. Ruger settled on the 1:16 twist and the same Wilson barrel blank used on the Blackhawk .357 Magnum. Ruger drilled and tapped the SRM-2 gun for Leupold bases and mounted a Leupold 4x IER scope in Leupold Dual Dovetail rings.

Bill Junior and I next swapped barrels, using a Wilson barrel vise clamped to a picnic table at the Ruger farm. Load/barrel combinations accurate at 100 yards were shot again at 200 yards. Accuracy of .38 Special and .357 Magnum ammunition generally was good to excellent from the .357 Maximum chambers.

Various forcing cones were tried. I didn't like the longer five-degree included-angle cone, as the bullet spends time in free air unsupported. The forcing cone is the least understood aspect of building an accurate revolver, and I am forced to include most gun writers, too many gunsmiths, and most shooters in this observation. The industry standard 11-degree included-angle forcing cone remains the best compromise between guidance and firm hold on the bullet I've seen yet incorporated. This has been known for more than a hundred years, as attested to by early Colt's and Smith & Wesson revolvers. And before anyone spits hairs, a 10-degree cone is just like an 11-degree cone. The rub comes in grinding or cutting a

sloppy, rough, or tilted cone, or cutting a concentric cone too deep. A proper forcing cone is the mother's milk of revolver accuracy.

Bill Ruger, Jr., and I fired the Maximum, one afternoon on a wooded piece of property outside Southport. Otherwise, all our test shooting, with the exception of SRM-4, was done at the farm in New Hampshire. Serial No. SRM-4 was consigned to me late in 1981, and I took the first game killed with a Maximum that season, a whitetail buck I tracked and then shot through the lungs on the run through open hardwoods at about 40 yards. My handload consisted of a Hornady .357 158-grain JHP (pre-XTP) at 1,925 fps, as measured on Dr. Kenneth Oehler's Model 33 chronograph. This quick kill through soft tissue nevertheless reminded me of why, had this been an adverse presentation, bullet mass carries more weight than velocity.

As I was the prime firearms evaluator for the International Handgun Metallic Silhouette Association (IHMSA, or "Im-Sah," as it is pronounced), and close to IHMSA president Elgin Gates, I told him of my visits to Ruger and the development of the .357 Maximum. What happened next was the explosion of the greyhound out of the gate. Elgin called, very shortly, to tell me of a cartridge he'd made up and called the ".357 SuperMag," and how he'd TIG-welded sections of .357 Magnum brass to make a longer case. I couldn't quite wrap my skull around "welding up" .357 brass, but took him at his word — and made the mistake of repeating it, in *writing*, no less. For all my involvement in silhouette and countless phone conversations with Elgin, not once had I heard the word "SuperMag." Now the words smothered conversation like a cheap suit. In the end, truth be told, the .357 Maximum was the brainchild of Bill Ruger, Jr., before Elgin

Gates released a long-cased .357 that was ultimately called the .357 SuperMag, the first in a series of metallic silhouette cartridges.



Photo by David Bradshaw



Photo by David Bradshaw

The original prototype .357 Maximum cartridge (left) with a 1.490-inch case, and the final Remington experimental .357 Maximum cartridge with a 1.605-inch case. The longer case is the one that eventually became SAAMI spec.



Photo by David Bradshaw

This is Remington's experimental .357 Maximum ammunition, which Bill Ruger, Jr., and David Bradshaw burned by the 1,000-round case in SRM prototype revolvers and transfer bar Hawkeye single-shots. Evidently, Remington never meant for this ammo to be shot by hand, as it feared it presented safety risks as loaded to over 75,000 psi!

The .357 Maximum has a maximum case length of 1.6 inches. Unlike the .357 Magnum, which was lengthened to prevent loading in guns chambered in .38 Specials (guns having strength inferior for handling the higher pressures), the Maximum was created to increase the payload of the cartridge and enable it to throw heavy projectiles at reasonable velocities for metallic silhouette shooting and hunting. As such, the case was lengthened accordingly over the .357 Magnum. The .357 Magnum simply did not provide enough punch to knock over the steel targets with any consistency in this

style of competition at extended ranges, and it had also proven marginal on large game animals.

Ruger produced a special Blackhawk single-action revolver with a lengthened frame to accommodate the requisite longer cylinder, in 1982. These revolvers were produced for just one year and experienced some trouble with particle and gas erosion to the forcing cone and the underside of the topstrap. Though these issues were only apparently evident when the cartridge was loaded with light bullets at high velocity, the gun media of the time was complicit in spreading misinformation from the typewriter. Plainly put, the .357 Maximum was never intended to be loaded in this manner, rather the intent was to be able to shoot heavy bullets in the 180- to 200-grain range at the same velocities the .357 Magnum was able to sling its lighter-weight bullets.



Photo by David Bradshaw

Federal Cartridge got involved, supplying David Bradshaw with experimental ammo stamped “357 Super Magnum.”



Photo by David Bradshaw

From left to right: The first Remington experimental load with a 1.49-inch case and 158-grain JHP; the first Federal experimental load with a 1.545-inch case and Sierra 170-grain FMJ (loaded to 77,000 psi); a Remington experimental load with 1.605-inch case; a Federal first production load with 1.605-inch case and 180-grain JHP (this one Bradshaw instigated); and a Speer pre-production 200-grain TMJ (electroplate jacket) in a Federal 1.605-inch case.

Sig Himmelfmann (of Seville fame) brought a .357 Maximum (marked as a .357 SuperMag) to market, in 1981, even before the brass and ammunition were available from Federal. Conversely, Ruger, with my assistance, took its time and did extensive testing of the gun and loads before shipping them in late 1982. Ruger was prudent and thorough in its design, testing, and production. As an aside, Dan Wesson, a force in metallic silhouette at this time, also offered a revolver in the .357 Maximum chambering (albeit the

revolvers were designated the .357 SuperMag). These were double-action revolvers that proved accurate and popular.

For me, the .357 Maximum by Ruger represents a high point in Sturm, Ruger & Company's revolver development. They were produced with extra care, as their purpose was to compete in metallic silhouette competition and to exercise dominion over creation in the hunting fields. So popular was this gun with them, that many IHMSA competitors immediately pressed their .357 Maximums to service in hunting. This was a race-bred machine from the factory. A finite number of these revolvers exist, and they are beginning to command a premium, as the collecting world is finally realizing the unique nature of these revolvers.

SPECIFICATIONS:	
Bullet Diameter:	.359-inch
Case Length:	1.605 inches
Overall Length:	1.990 inches
Maximum Pressure:	52,000 psi

Grip Frames

Ruger revolver collector and expert Bill Hamm gave us permission to reprint the excellent chart he and Boge Quinn of Gunblast.com fame created (appearing at the end of this chapter). It explains the various grip frames produced by Ruger and used on its various single-action revolvers. They also outlined each grip frame for comparison, and the chart breaks down the dates of production. I figured it would serve the reader best if I didn't reinvent the wheel — this chart is an *invaluable* tool. A special

thanks goes out to Bill Hamm and Jeff and Boge Quinn of Gunblast.com for allowing me to utilize their chart in this book.

That said, let's talk about Ruger grip frames for a moment. Of grip frames, custom maker Hamilton Bowen so succinctly stated, "Perhaps the most important was the Bisley model, with its distinctive grip frame that paved the way for serious development of ultra big-bore revolvers." I agree with this sentiment completely and without reservation. The vertical profile provided by the Bisley grip frame, as interpreted by Ruger, is second to none, with regards to controlling monster recoil. While grip frame preference is a subjective choice for the individual shooter, the overwhelming majority will agree that the Bisley is a step in the right direction to control heavy recoil.

The Bisley grip frame, as interpreted by Ruger, has a more vertical profile than the other designs that are lumped together as "plow handles" and sharing a common shape/profile. Yes, the many plow handles differ, but they react similarly under recoil, tending to pivot up by design. While this works well under light to moderate recoil, I have found they are woefully inadequate, when recoil rises to significant levels.

The Bisley by Ruger — not to be confused with the target grip by Colt's — offers a significant improvement in handling debilitating recoil. The common complaint about the Ruger Bisley grip by its few detractors is the limited space between the shooter's knuckle and the triggerguard and the subsequent tendency for the shooter's middle knuckle to make contact with the back of the guard. It's a legitimate complaint. Under heavy recoil, I have experienced this phenomenon, but I'm willing to live with it, as the Bisley offers much greater control than the plow handle-style of grip frame.

Some custom gunsmiths, like Jack Huntington, have developed modifications to the Bisley that create greater space between the knuckles

and the triggerguard. I had such a modification performed on my .500 Maximum Ruger, and it has limited the contact considerably. That said, a custom set of grips — a true custom set of grips made for your hand, not off-the-shelf “custom” grips — go a long way toward improving comfort and control, particularly when stepping into the heavier recoiling calibers. Grips aside, the Bisley by Ruger (I feel compelled to keep reiterating this point, as it should in no uncertain terms be confused with the original Colt’s Bisley design), is vastly superior, in my opinion, to any other Ruger grip frame, when heavy recoil is on the menu. I know some of you prefer the other grip styles, but a majority of frequent big-caliber shooters agree with my position here.

Bradshaw on the .357 Maximum Grip Frame

The development of the .357 Maximum Blackhawk was an exciting time for Bill Ruger, Sr., and Bill Ruger, Jr., alike. David Bradshaw, a close friend of the family and a technical “guinea pig” for special Ruger projects, being one of the most accomplished competitive handgun shooters alive, was again asked his opinion on matters concerning the .357 Maximum, this time, mainly what grip frame the new revolver should wear.

Trying to decide what handle the new stretched-frame revolver should be equipped with, Bill Senior carefully threw a question out to Bradshaw about what he thought of the Bisley grip, referring to the Colt target grip. It seems Bill Senior had a concept for a new grip in his head, a creative reinterpretation of the Bisley grip frame design more to his liking, and unbeknownst to Bradshaw.

Bradshaw’s response was quick, concise, and razor sharp, when he unequivocally referred to the Bisley grip (by Colt) as “an

abomination of Victorian design. It is skinny and ambivalent and an eyesore on the beautiful Peacemaker.”

Bill senior was equally quick with his retort, stating that the Bisley “doesn’t have to be like that. I’m thinking we should introduce the Maximum with a Bisley grip, a Bisley grip more suited to the cartridge and the Blackhawk.”

Bradshaw quipped, “I was visualizing a Colt Bisley grip, and not what Bill Sr. actually had in mind for a new grip.”

Keep in mind that this was a number of years before Ruger’s debut of its own Bisley grip, and both Bill Rugers felt the new Maximum would be a good platform from which to debut their new grip frame. Bill Senior suffered from rheumatoid arthritis, and he felt there had to be a grip that would allow him to better and more easily shoot than that of the Super Blackhawk (Dragoon) grip frame (and that actually wound up on the new .357 Maximum).

Eager to see the new revolver go into production, Bradshaw feared that testing an experimental grip frame would only delay the release of the .357 Maximum.

So, in the rush to release the .357 Maximum, Ruger’s vast improvement of the Colt Bisley grip would have to wait. Bradshaw went on to win a number of major competitions with a Ruger .357 Maximum Blackhawk.



Author Photo

The Bisley grip frame is on top, compared to the Super Blackhawk of “Dagoon-style” grip on the bottom.



Author Photo

Jack Huntington performs subtle modifications to the Bisley grip frame (top) that make for a much more pleasant shooting experience in heavy-recoiling calibers, including making more room between your knuckles and the back side of the triggerguard. The bottom grip frame is a standard Ruger Bisley.



Author Photo

This photo illustrates the similarities in profile between the Jack Huntington-modified XR3-RED grip frame above to the Ruger Bisley grip frame below. This modified grip frame has all the control advantages of the Bisley, without the knuckle-smashing aspects.



Author Photo

An unmodified XR3-RED grip frame overlaid on a Jack Huntington-modified XR3-RED.



Author Photo

A modified XR3-RED by JRH Advanced Gunsmithing on the left, with an unmodified XR3-RED grip frame on the right for comparison. JRH not only extends the grip frame, but also extensively reworks and recontours it. This grip frame has all of the advantages the Ruger Bisley and none of the negatives.



Author Photo

The Bisley by Ruger is a package consisting of a lower hammer and a reshaped trigger to match the different profile of the Bisley grip frame. The hammer on the left is standard Blackhawk fare, while the hammer on the right is for a Bisley.



Author Photo

The trigger on the left is for a Blackhawk with a standard plow-handle grip frame, while the trigger on the right is a Bisley.

Ruger Single-Action Grip Frames

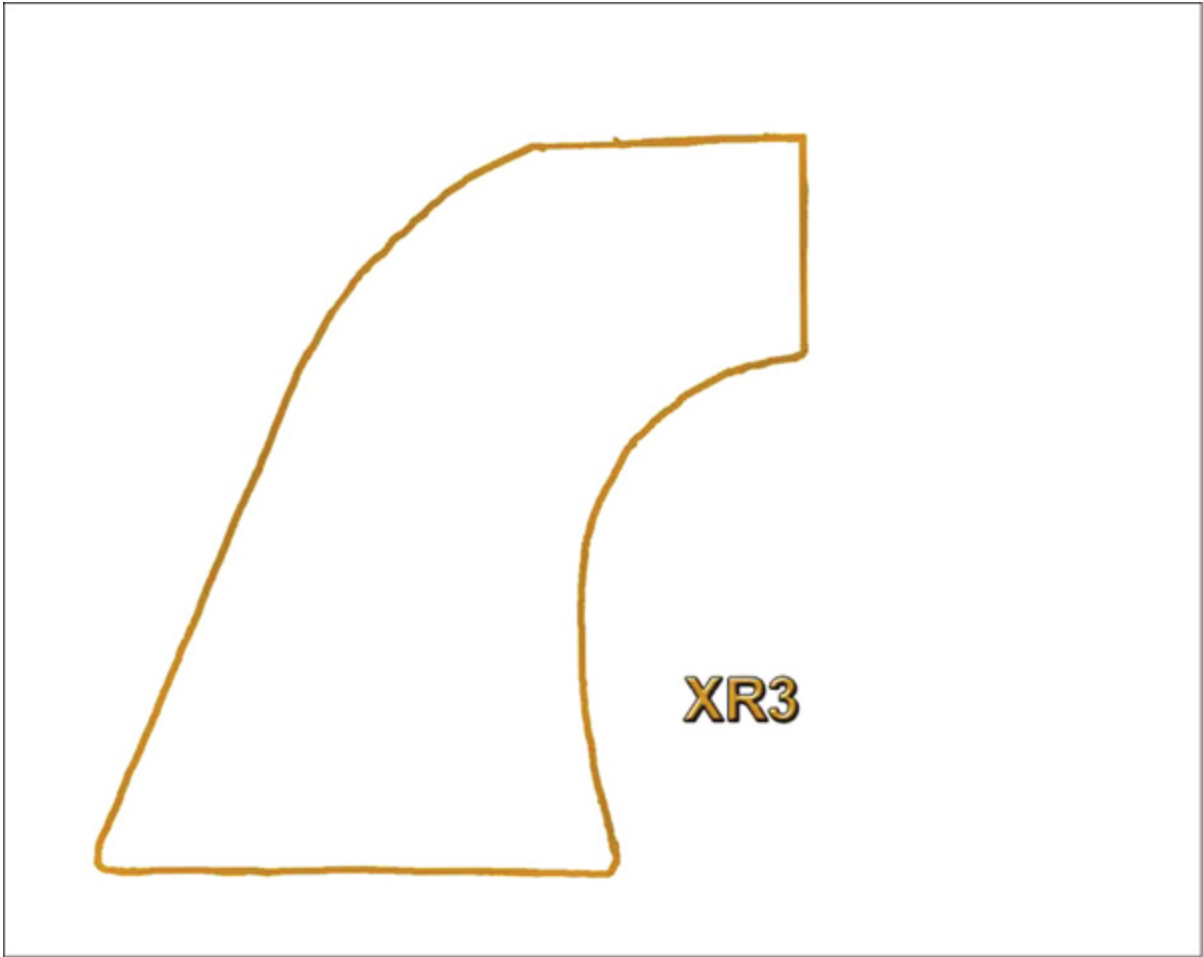
By Bill Hamm

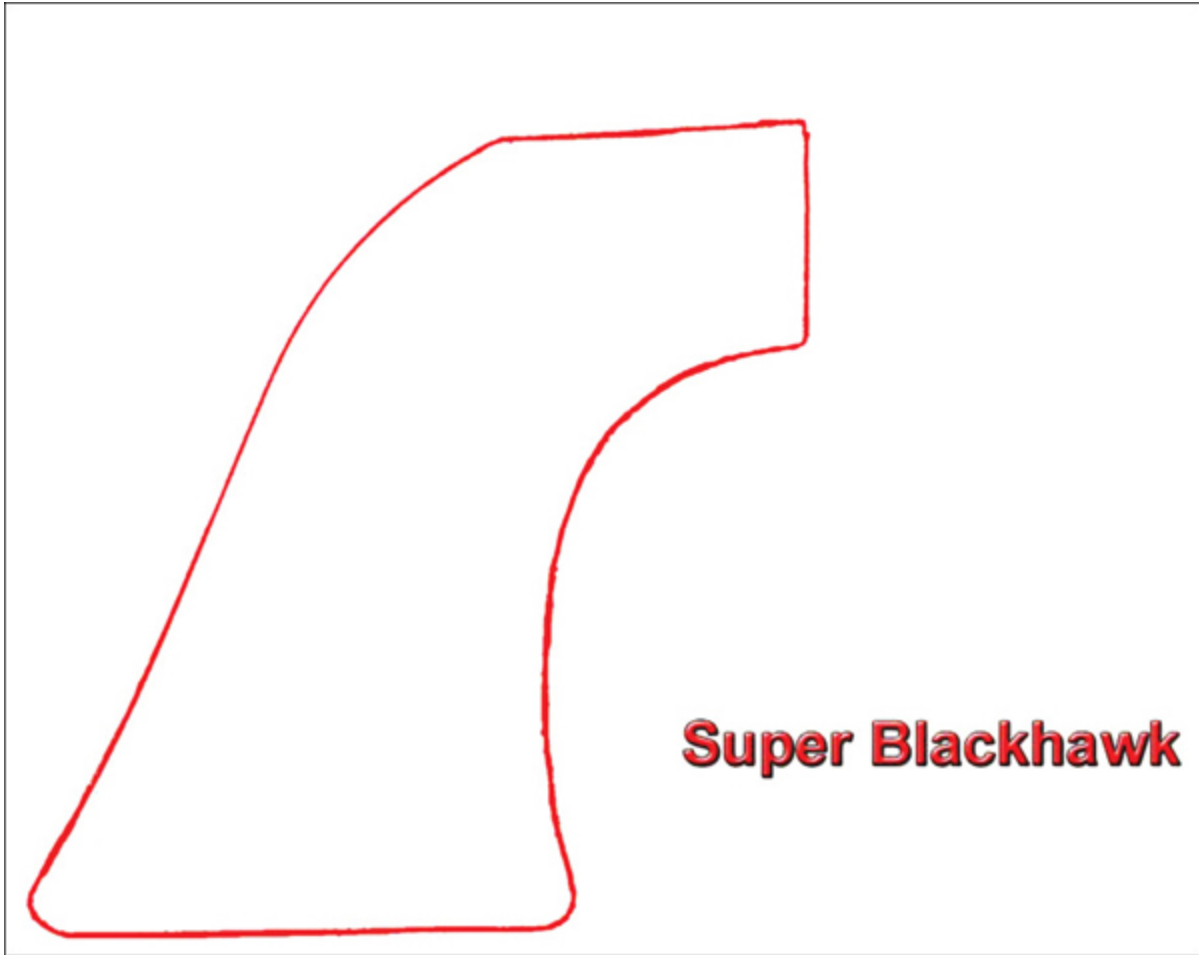
Introduced	Type / Marking	Frame Material/ Finish	Grip Panels	Production Status
1953	Ruger's first frame was the XR3. It was introduced on the Single-Six, same size as Colt SAA, marked "XR3." Had the maker, "Alcoa" on the frames. Also used on .357 and .44 "Flattop" Blackhawks.	Aluminum alloy, black anodized; aluminum alloy natural polished on most engraved Single-Sixes.	Black checkered hard rubber, varnished walnut, rosewood, available as an accessory stag and ivory. Above had black Ruger eagles. Also some experimental plastics, without medallions.	Discontinued 1962.
1958	Bearcat grip frame is integral to cylinder frame, early frames were marked "Alcoa" (Although normally hard to read) and have a PR-1 mark. The triggerguard is a separate part.	Aluminum alloy grip frame, black anodized. Triggerguards are brass anodized with a few black finish.	Resin-impregnated rosewood without medallions. Oil-filled walnut with silver/aluminum medallions containing an impressed Ruger eagle.	Discontinued 1970.
1959	Super Blackhawk "Dragoon" style with square back triggerguard; no marking, some observed with a letter such as an "A"; about 300 early frames were ¼" longer than the standard frame, known today as "long frames."	Steel/blued.	Varnished walnut, oil-filled walnut with black Ruger eagle medallions. Beginning about mid-1971, the medallions were changed to a flat silver eagle.	Discontinued 1973.
1962/1963	Redesigned and replaced the original 1953 XR3 frame, marked "XR3-RED," also had the maker, "Alcoa," on early frames. Used on Single-Six, Super Single-Six, Blackhawk, Hawkeye, Old Army. Hawkeye frame had wider trigger slot to accommodate Super Blackhawk trigger.	Aluminum alloy, black anodized.	Varnished walnut, oil-filled walnut with black Ruger eagle medallions. Beginning about mid-1971, the medallions were changed to a flat silver eagle.	Discontinued 1972/73 (except for Old Army which was discontinued about 1985 when replaced with steel).
1966	Super Blackhawk Brass "Dragoon" style with square back triggerguard. Same dimensions as 1959 Super Blackhawk. Marked "MR-3DB." Initially for Super Blackhawks, then shipped on various Blackhawks, majority in 1972.	Brass.	Oil-filled walnut with black Ruger eagle medallions or the later flat silver eagle.	Discontinued 1972/73. In catalog for the Old Army until 1975.
1971	Super Bearcat, same dimensions as original 1958 Bearcat. No mark observed.	Steel, blued.	Oil-filled walnut with silver/aluminum medallions containing an impressed Ruger eagle.	Discontinued 1974.

1972/1973	Redesign of the Old Model 1962/63 XR3-RED for the New Model to accommodate new trigger spring and safety transfer bar. Same dimensions as Old Model XR3-RED. Marked XRN-3RED on black anodized and blued steel, KXR3 on stainless (began with Super Single-Sixes in 1974). Used on New Model Single-Six, Super Single-Six, Blackhawk, Vaquero, and 4 ⁵ / ₈ . and 5 ¹ / ₂ -inch barrel Super Blackhawks.	Aluminum alloy, black anodized; steel, blued; stainless steel.	Oil-filled walnut, gonzalo alves, rosewood, and simulated ivory, all with the raised silver with black background Ruger eagle. Also simulated ivory with scrimshaw black eagle on Sheriff and other special models. In January 2003, cocobolo grips with the silver Ruger eagle but a red background are seen on the 50 th Anniversary Single-Six commemorative revolvers.	Current production.
1972/1973	Redesigned the Old Model 1959 Super Blackhawk "Dragoon" to accommodate new trigger spring and new safety transfer bar, same dimensions as Old Model, no mark observed. New Model Super Blackhawk, .357 Maximum.	Steel, blued; stainless steel.	Oil-filled walnut, gonzalo alves, and rosewood. Raised silver with black background Ruger eagle medallions.	Current production.
1975	1962/1963 XR3-RED frame produced in stainless steel for Old Army, marked KXR3. Introduced steel in 1985 for blued Old Army. Has wide trigger slot.	Stainless steel; steel, blued	Oil-filled walnut, rosewood, and simulated ivory. Raised silver with black background Ruger eagle medallions.	Current production.
1986	Bisley, a modified Colt Bisley style of a longer grip frame; no major mark observed. Used on Bisley and Bisley Vaquero.	Steel, blued; stainless steel.	Oil-filled walnut, gonzalo alves, rosewood, and simulated ivory. Raised silver Ruger eagle medallions.	Current production.
1992	New Model Super Blackhawk "Hunter" with round triggerguard, same grip panel size as standard Super Blackhawk, marked KHRN.	Stainless steel.	Green and silver, black and silver laminated wood. Raised silver with black background Ruger eagle medallions.	Discontinued 1994 but reintroduced 2002 – current production.
1993	New Model Bearcat, same panel size as Old Model Bearcat and Super Bearcat, no major mark.	Steel, blued; stainless steel.	Oil-filled walnut, rosewood. Some early guns may have the old style oil-filled walnut panels and flat silver/aluminum impressed Ruger eagle medallions. Most have rosewood panels and smaller raised silver with black background Ruger eagle medallions.	Discontinued 1994 but reintroduced in 1996 – current production.

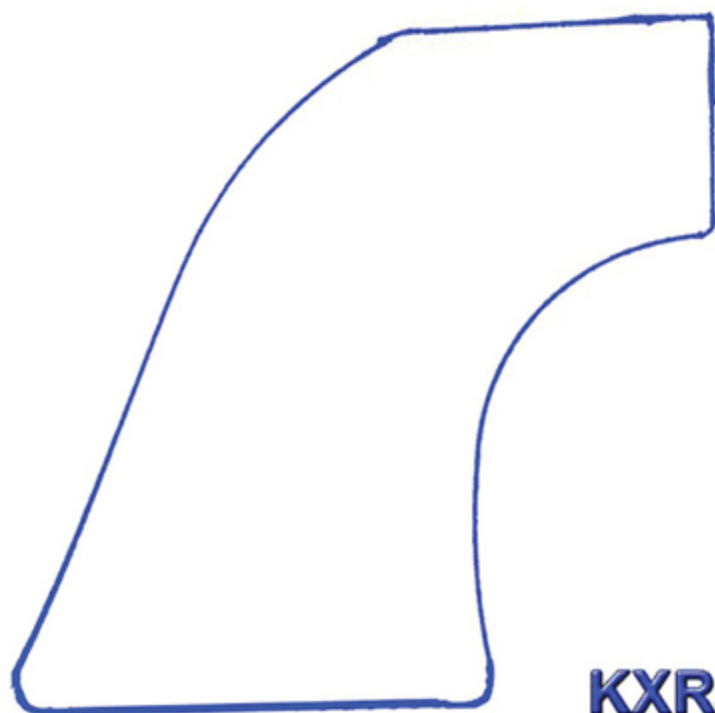
2001	XRN-3RED "short" frame, about ¼-inch shorter than standard 1972/73 XRN-3RED. Single-Six .32s w/ Vaquero sights, stainless frame marked KXR3 like standard stainless frame.	Steel, blued; stainless steel.	Rosewood, simulated ivory. Raised silver with black background Ruger eagle medallions.	Current production.
2001/2002	Bird's Head on large and small frame Bird's Head Vaquero and fixed "Vaquero style" sight .32 H&Rs.	Steel, blued; stainless steel.	Black Micarta, simulated ivory. Raised silver with black background Ruger eagle medallions.	Current production.
2004/2005	The NEW XR3 style grip frame is very similar to the original Ruger Single-Action, Colt SAA style, introduced in 1953. The grip panel locator pin is in a slightly different location from the original, primarily due to the new internal safety lock mechanism. These frames are found on the smaller cylinder-framed "New" Vaquero (2004) and the 50 th Anniversary .357 Blackhawk "Flattop" (2005). They are also found on the larger cylinder-framed 50 th Anniversary .44 "Flattop" (2006).	Steel/blued or stainless. The interior design accommodates the new internal safety lock mechanism.	"New" Vaquero – Black hard rubber checkered panels with the Ruger trademark eagle logo molded into the panel. 50th Anniversary Blackhawk "Flattops" – Black hard rubber checkered panels with the old style post 1966 – 1971 "fat neck" trademark black eagle on silver medallions.	Current production.

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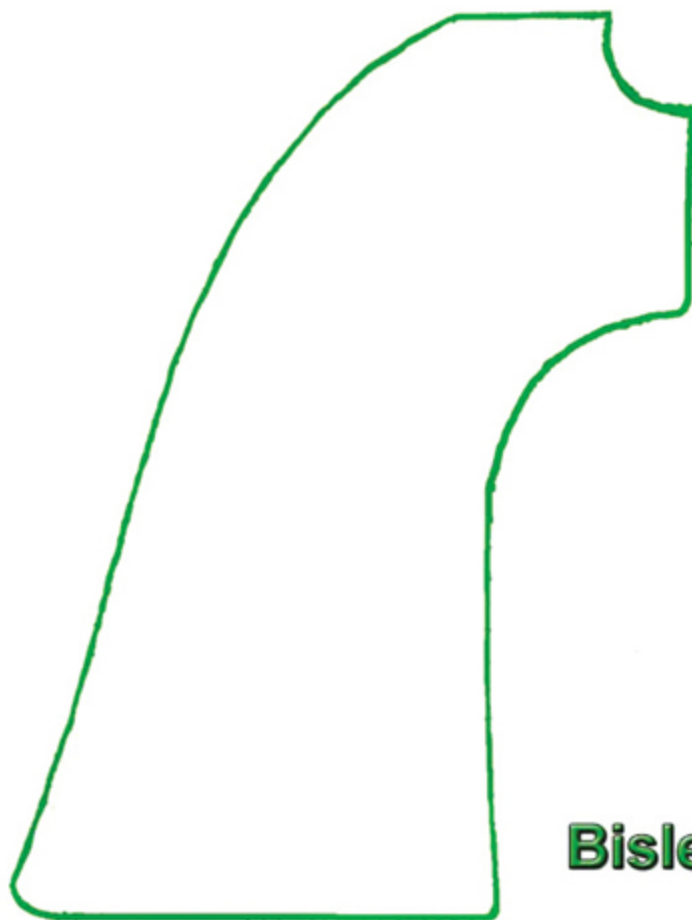




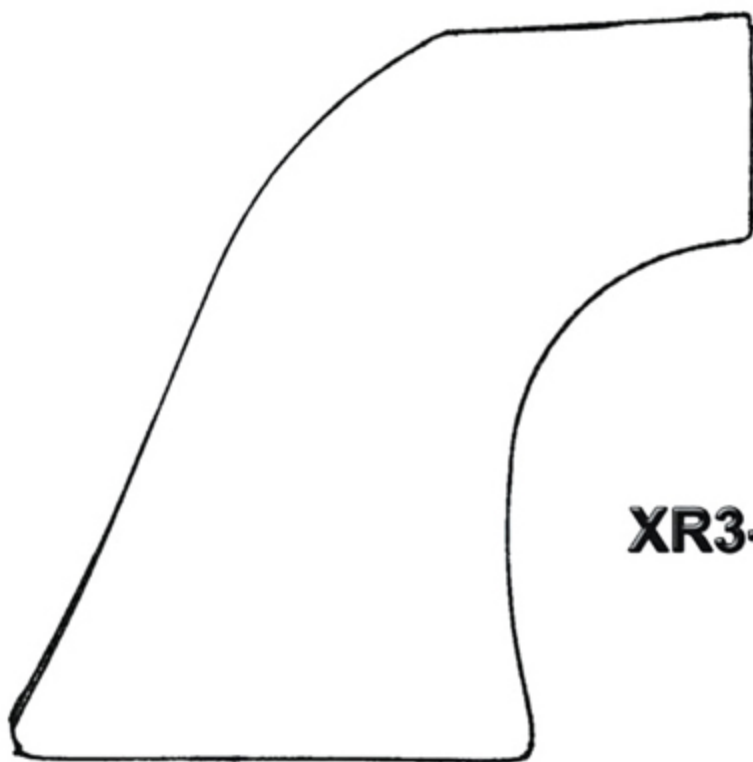
Sketches courtesy Bill Hamm and Boge Quinn



KXR3 (Short)



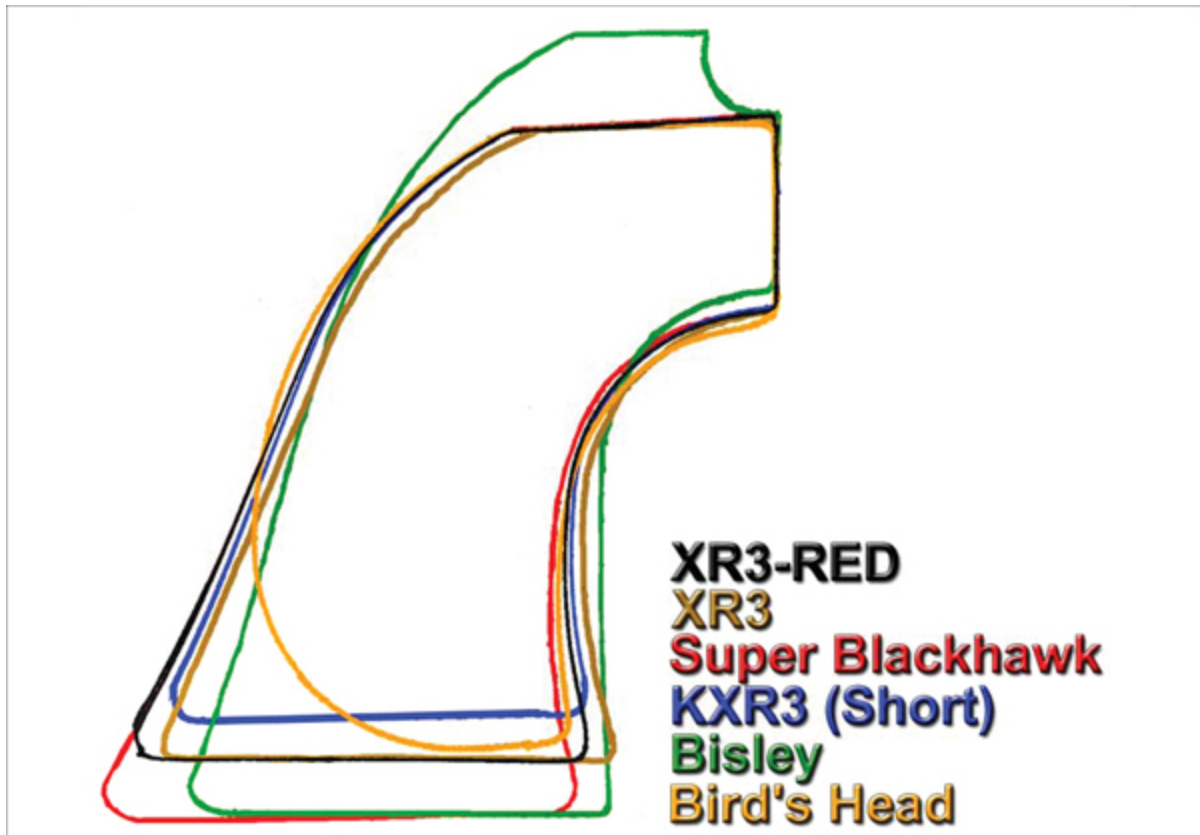
Bisley



XR3-RED



Bird's Head



All grip frames overlaid.

I am not alone in my opinion and admiration of Ruger's interpretation of the Bisley grip frame. In *Big Bore Sixguns*, John Taffin states, "In reality, the Bisley grip frame is the most comfortable grip frame for shooting heavy loads ever offered by either Colt's or Ruger. A vast improvement over the original Bisley, it is not the same as that found on the old Colt, because it does not come up as high behind the triggerguard. Ruger's original answer to handle heavy recoil, the Super Blackhawk grip frame, is especially punishing to me with heavy loads, as it solidly and painfully raps my knuckle and the top of my trigger finger."

There is another grip frame option worth looking into, and I believe it is the best compromise when seeking both comfort and control, when high levels of recoil are present. Gunsmith Jack Huntington

modifies the various plow handle grips to include the XR3, XR3-RED, and the Dragoon style (Super Blackhawk) that recontours the grip, giving it more length and a more vertical profile similar to the Bisley. I think, personally, that this is the best of both worlds. It offers the same control the Bisley is famous for, yet provides a much greater level of comfort. The cost of the conversion, including custom grips (*real* custom grips) in high-end walnut or Micarta, is a bargain and well worth the cost. I have also included a photo of an XR3-RED grip as modified by Jack Huntington with a Bisley grip to show the similarities in profile and to emphasize the increase in space between the grip and the triggerguard. Either one makes shooting a heavy-recoiling revolver a whole lot more pleasurable.

CHAPTER FIVE

THE DOUBLE-ACTIONS



The double-action revolver is the more modern interpretation of the wheelgun. They offer a couple distinct, but, perhaps, simply perceived advantages (as some would have you believe), over their single-action siblings.

First, they have the ability to be fired simply by pulling the trigger, without having to cock the hammer back. This action can save you some time, particularly in an emergency situation, where rate of fire counts dividends, such as would happen if you found yourself under a large hunk of fur with fangs hell bent on turning you into a Happy Meal (or not-so-

Happy Meal). Likewise, the same holds true for a situation when facing multiple assailants of the two-legged kind.

Second, there's the ability to swing open the cylinder for a much easier and faster loading/unloading compared to the single-action revolver and its gate-accessed one-round-at-a-time design. This is particularly useful, when you find yourself under an entire pack of fur bearers with fangs hell bent on serving you up family style (finger-lickin' good!), or facing an even larger group of assailants.

Like all Ruger products, particularly Ruger handguns, the double-action revolvers are no exception, when it comes to over-engineering and a nod towards uncompromising strength. You will see that none of Ruger's double-action revolvers are spindly in construction, something that gives them more bulk, but also gives the shooter confidence and peace of mind. Ruger didn't get into the double-action racket until the 1970s, but, when it did, a slew of iconic revolvers was the result.

Before you say it, yes, Ruger double-action revolvers have a reputation for bulk. This is an oft-cited criticism, but one I see as a non-issue. I am not alone in my beliefs, as you will see later in the custom revolver segment of this book. Those who build custom revolvers, modify them, and/or repair them see the Ruger durability component as a clear asset. To paraphrase master gun builder Hamilton Bowen, you will not shoot a Ruger Redhawk loose; the same cannot be said for Smith & Wesson's various offerings. Don't read me wrong. I *absolutely* appreciate Smith & Wesson revolvers and own a number of them — and I will continue to own them. But, when I'm serious about going afield, a Ruger revolver normally gets the nod. With their inherent bulk comes more than a modicum of reliability, the most important asset one can have when their life may depend on a tool for survival.

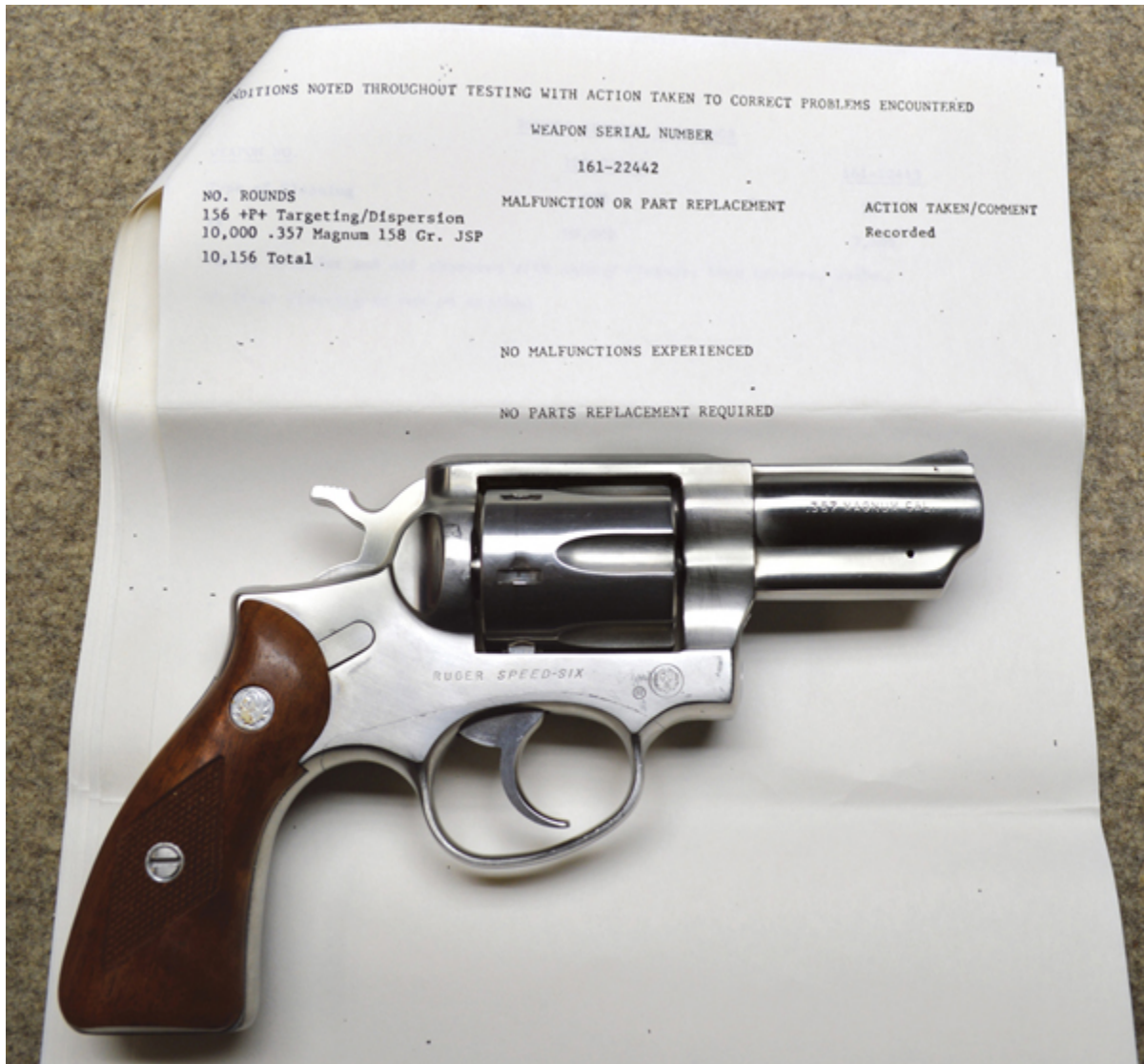
Security Six

Wanting a complete line of firearms to offer the shooting public, it was only natural for Ruger to add a double-action to the lineup. Too, going head-to-head with the likes of Colt's and Smith & Wesson was natural for Bill Ruger, Sr. But, Ruger would offer a modern alternative unlike its competitors that were still building revolvers of old design.

Chambered in .357 Magnum, the Security Six, also known as the Model 117, was introduced in 1970 and produced through 1985. The Security Six was available with a snub 2¾-inch, four-inch, or six-inch barrel. Adjustable sights were standard, as was a square butt and checkered walnut grips. Some early versions were manufactured with fixed sights and were also marked "Security Six;" later, this fixed-sight model was re-dubbed the "Service Six" and was thusly marked. A rarer, rounded butt version was also available, and such revolvers now fetch a premium with collectors. The Model 717 was the stainless steel version of the Security Six revolver.

Speed Six

Introduced in 1973 and no longer in production, what are collectively called Ruger's Speed Sixes were also known as the Model 207 when chambered in .357 Magnum, the Model 208 chambered in .38 Special and, also, the Model 209. Available with a 2¾-inch or four-inch barrels, the gun has a rounded butt and checkered walnut grips, the gun made in blued steel with fixed sights. A number were available with bobbed hammers, but the rarest, from a collector's standpoint, are the military models chambered in .38 S&W (and so marked), and equipped with a lanyard ring. The stainless versions were designated the Model 737, 738, and 739, in .357 Magnum, .38 Special, and 9mm, respectively.



Author Photo

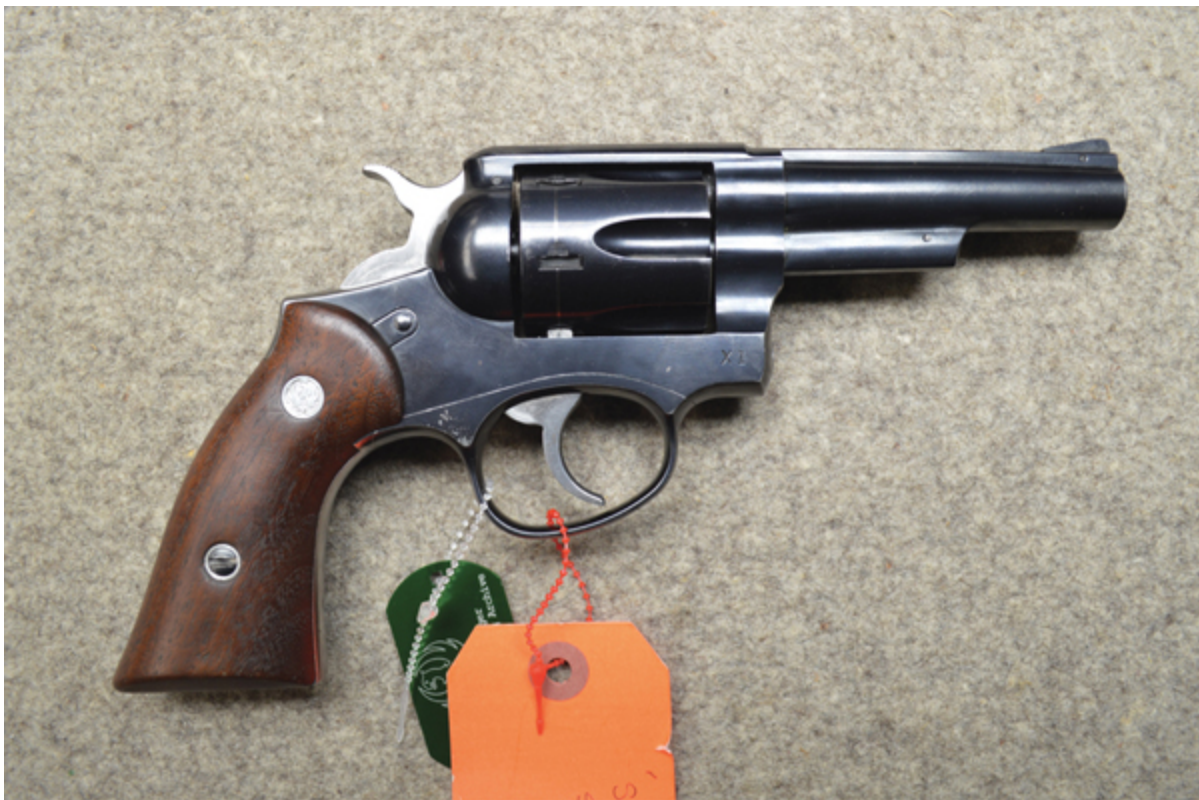
This particular Speed Six, circa 1984, was torture tested with 10,000 rounds of .357 Magnum +P+ rounds and, as the documentation clearly states, there were absolutely no malfunctions. It is yet another example of Ruger toughness.

Police Service-Six

We touched upon this revolver in the Security Six segment. It is also referred to as the Model 107 when chambered in .357 Magnum, the Model 108 in .38 Special and, last, as the Model 109 chambered in 9mm. This blued steel revolver was available mainly with a 2¾-inch or four-inch

barrel, while a few were produced with a six-inch barrel, all with fixed sights and a square butt with checkered walnut stocks. The 9mm version, the Model 109, was dropped from the lineup, in 1984, while the other two models followed suit, ending all Police Service-Six production, in 1988.

The stainless steel versions were designated the Models 707 and 708, in .357 Magnum and .38 Special, respectively, and a four-inch barrel. No 9mm stainless steel version was ever produced.



This Security Six, serial No. X-1, is the first one ever.

Author Photo



Author Photo

This is the first GP100 prototype made — on a Redhawk frame!



Author Photo

A dealer exclusive competition GP100.

GP100

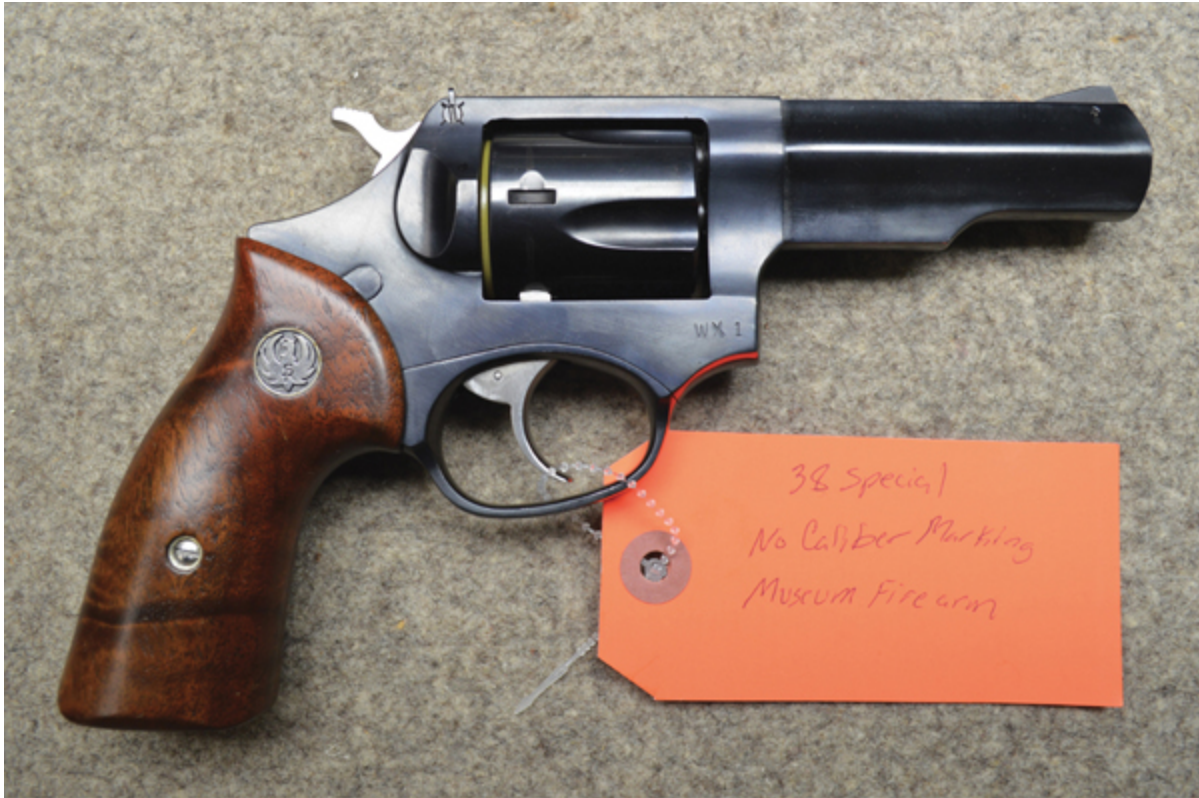
Designed to be used by police and for personal-defense, the GP100 was released, in 1985, as a .357 Magnum. Offered with a three-, four-, or six-inch barrel and with an adjustable rear sight, the sidearm was available in blued or stainless steel. Unlike the competition, the GP100 features a full frame and not a “half frame” or sideplate style, and with a dual cylinder locking system. The GP100 is of very stout construction. The grip is cast integrally to the cylinder frame.

There was some concern that the GP100 wouldn't be received with enthusiasm by law enforcement agencies and that dropping the successful and smaller Security Six line of revolvers would be a mistake. True, the GP100 was larger framed and, consequently, bulkier (and heavier) than the Security Six, but Bill Ruger didn't share those concerns or fears, and the Security Six line was dropped for good.



Author Photo

A GP100 in .357 Magnum.



Author Photo

This is the first prototype SP101, in .38 Special.



Author Photo

A prototype SP101 in .357 Magnum.



Author Photo

An SP101 in .357 Magnum.



Photo by Matthew Cosenzo

This is a customized SP101 by Gemini Customs. The barrel was shortened from four to three inches, then slab-sided and fluted. A Weigand interchangeable front sight base was added, the gun was dehorned and glass beaded, and it also got a Bowen Rough Country rear sight, custom grips, and a tuned action.

SP101

The little SP101 made its debut, in 1988. Both the SP101 and the larger GP100 revolvers replaced the earlier Security Six series. It was available as a six-shot .32 H&R Magnum, a five-shot 9mm, and a five-shot .38 Special or .357 Magnum. A .22 LR version was added to the lineup at a later date in the SP101's production life and continues today. Available only with fixed sights, the revolver originally came in three barrel lengths, 2¼, 3¼, and four inches. There is also a full ejector shroud, except in the case of the .22 LR version. Today, the SP101 is available in .38 Special, .357 Magnum, .327 Federal Magnum, and .22 LR, in two barrel lengths, 2¼- and 3¼-inch.

The Redhawk

The 1980s ushered in Ronald Reagan, an economic upswing, New Wave music, bad fashion, and the all new Ruger Redhawk. The Redhawk represented a new era of .44 Magnums — big, bold, bulletproof (so to speak), and able to digest ammunition no S&W Model 29 could ever hope to shoot and survive.

A trend emerging of handgun hunters demanding the use of ever heavier bullets for big-game necessitated a platform that could take the extra punishment of handloads pushing the ballistic envelope. It was clear that the Redhawk, from the start, was up to the task.

The Redhawk began its storied existence as the ultimate double-action revolver. Later iterations were made available in .357 Magnum (interchangeable with .38 Special), .41 Magnum and .45 Colt. Since the Redhawk proved more than up to the task of withstanding the abuse of the larger .44 Magnum, the smaller-caliber versions were inherently stronger by virtue of their even thicker cylinder walls.



Photo by Lee Martin

A Ruger Redhawk .44 Magnum.



Author Photo

Ruger's extremely tough Redhawk in .44 Magnum with a 4.2-inch barrel.

The Redhawk was available in both blued steel and stainless steel, the grip in walnut. Blued steel versions in .44 Magnum were made available with a 5½- or 7½-inch barrel and an additional option of a 7½-inch barrel with scope ring mounting points machined into the barrel (available in 1986).

The Redhawk features heft in all of the right places, the result an exceptionally strong revolver *built* around a *specific* cartridge — in this case the .44 Remington Magnum — instead of *adapting* a cartridge to an *existing* platform, as was the case with Smith & Wesson's Model 29. The Ruger Redhawk was the “first double-action properly scaled to the .44 Magnum cartridge,” stated master gunsmith Hamilton Bowen. Introduced in 1979, the Redhawk epitomizes Ruger's propensity for over-engineering. Bowen went on to say, “In general, Redhawks are perfectly suited to large, high-performance sporting cartridges.”

What did Bowen mean by that? Well, to start, the cylinder is considerably larger than that of the Blackhawk and much larger than that of any other double-action revolver in existence (save for Smith & Wesson's super-sized X-frame). Second, the barrel shank of a Redhawk is the largest of all production revolvers. Last, the frame sports a thick topstrap and a unique crane locking system.

According to Bowen, "Redhawks rarely ever go out of time or shoot loose." Cylinder notches are placed between chambers and not directly over the thinnest part of the cylinder. These offset bolt notches allow for a lot more metal around each chamber. Also worth noting is that Ruger didn't really have to offset the notches. Center-positioning them would have provided enough "meat" for the .44 Magnum. But, by over-building it, in 1979, Ruger already had the basis for the .454, in 1999 (even without a crystal ball to reveal the future); center-cut stops on the .454 would have necessitated a five-shot cylinder design. In short, the buffer or margin that Ruger builds into its firearms allows them to up-size, or power-up, on the fly, without having to reengineer.

The biggest and most frequent complaint I have heard about the Redhawk is about the grip frame, but let me be more specific. The Redhawk uses one spring to operate the hammer *and* the trigger. This design makes tuning the action a more difficult and somewhat problematic undertaking. How? By lightening the trigger pull, the hammer is also lightened, which can result in light hammer strikes. Lighter hammer strikes can compromise primer ignition, not something attractive, particularly when your Redhawk is performing bear protection duty. It would be one hell of a time to find out you have ignition problems when an 800-pound grizzly is chewing on you. This issue was addressed with the advent of the Ruger Super Redhawk, by

virtue of its GP100 grip frame utilizing separate springs for the trigger and the hammer.

The Super Redhawk

Introduced in 1987 and chambered in .44 Magnum, a .454 Casull version was added, in 1999, and, in 2001, Ruger's very own .480 Ruger entered the marketplace. The snub-nosed Alaskan model was first introduced in 2005, chambered in both the raucous .454 Casull, and the .480 Ruger. A .44 Magnum version of the Super Redhawk Alaskan joined the others, in 2007.

The image of a tank comes to mind, when I think of the Super Redhawk. While dimensionally nearly identical to its parent Redhawk, the addition of a frame extension at the front of the frame and from which the barrel protrudes, gives the illusion of mass — *much* more mass. While it feels solid and substantial, I don't find its weight to be a negative, particularly when shooting loads from the upper end of the spectrum. In this case, mass is definitely your friend.

When introduced, the Super Redhawk was intended to supersede the legendary Redhawk, thereby addressing a number of that latter model's perceived shortcomings. One was that Ruger felt the frame was a better mounting point for a scope or other optic than was the barrel, so it extended the frame to accommodate another mounting point. Another point of contention addressed was the grip frame (more on that later), with the Super Redhawk receiving the superior grip frame from the GP100.



Author Photo

In college, the author's reloading setup wasn't very sophisticated, but it was the only way to make possible shooting the .44 Magnum at the volumes he did.

My own introduction to the Super Redhawk came, in 1991. I picked up the slightly used, 7½-inch .44 Magnum from my local gun shop, the Lock, Stock 'n' Barrel, of San Gabriel, California. The original owner was selling it on consignment and the deal was too good to pass up. (It's truly amazing how many very slightly used big-bore revolvers I find being sold on consignment in gun shops — they are clearly not for everyone.)

What first struck me about this revolver, aside from the size, was the glass-smooth and crisp trigger. I wondered if someone had worked their magic on it, especially when later I handled a couple others that were equally slick in the trigger department, and I was assured, in both cases, that the actions were factory stock.

The next item to impress me was the accuracy I was able to squeeze out of this revolver, both with handloads and factory ammo. My reloading setup in those days wasn't very refined, consisting of a Lee handloader that, with me at the controls, churned out ammo at a snail's pace. Still, I came up with some great, accurate loads featuring a stiff charge of 2400 under a 240-grain Keith-style semi-wadcutter. The heft of the Super Redhawk made pleasurable to plink with loads that were downright uncomfortable in my various Model 29s.

That revolver went down the road some time later to help finance another gun purchase I just "had to have," but it wasn't my last Super Redhawk. My next Super Redhawk encounter took place in 2001, upon returning to California from an overseas assignment. As was my habit in those days, after being away for year-long stretches at a time, I dropped in on my local gun shop to say hello and catch up (and, inevitably, buy more guns!). In the display case, drawing me towards it like a beacon, was the all-new .480 Ruger Super Redhawk, in all of its gray glory. That Target Gray finish had been met with mixed emotions by the public. Some loved it, some loathed it. I was instantly smitten with it.



Author Photo

The .480 Ruger is back!

At the time, only a handful of factory loads were available for the new .480 Ruger, the first cartridge to bear the Ruger name. The lightest was a jacketed hollow-point of 275 grains, the other two 325-grainers at an advertised 1,350 fps. I felt that the recoil, though somewhat stiff, wasn't debilitating enough *not* to shoot the wheels off of that SRH! I broke it in properly on a pair of Florida wild hogs, the .480 Ruger proving terminally effective in bringing home the bacon.

Later that same year, I found a slightly used, Target Gray Super Redhawk in .454 Casull, along with a half-box of ammunition, in my local gun shop on consignment (I bought a *lot* of guns on consignment from them). That one was also accurate with most of the factory fodder it digested (at that time, I didn't load for that round), and it, too, put a serious dent in the Florida feral hog population. With full-tilt .454 loads, the Casull version of

the SRH proved to be considerably less pleasant to shoot, from a recoil standpoint, than its sibling in .480 Ruger. The higher pressure .454 has a much snappier and abrupt recoil impulse, whereas the .480 recoils with more of a big push. However, the big Super Redhawk absorbs a great deal of the recoil energy produced by either heavy-weight cartridge, particularly when equipped with Hogue's excellent Tamer grips, which are now standard on .480 and .454 Super Redhawks.

Though they look quite different from one another, the Redhawk and Super Redhawk are a lot more similar than what appears at first glance. Actually, aside from the frame extension and the GP100 grip frame, the Redhawk and the Super Redhawk *are* the same. The disadvantage the Super Redhawk has compared to the Redhawk, its bulk, is also its greatest advantage, from a recoil dampening standpoint.

A big plus for the SRH? The integral scope ring frame mounting points take the stresses off the barrel shank, placing them squarely on the frame, increasing longevity *and* improving balance. That said, the greatest advantage enjoyed by the Super Redhawk over its sibling Redhawk is the action. The Super Redhawk was fitted with the dual spring grip frame of its little brother, the GP100, making it infinitely more tunable and potentially smoother than the Redhawk.



Author Photo

A new .480 Ruger SRH.

Originally offered in .44 Magnum, the Super Redhawk became the launching point for Ruger's foray into truly big-bore cartridges. Enter the Super Redhawk in Dick Casull's utterly raucous .454 Casull.

Ruger wasn't content with addressing the .454's high operating pressures with the simplicity of a five-shot cylinder. Instead, Ruger sourced a special high-strength steel called "465 Carpenter." This steel was torture tested by Ruger to make absolutely certain it was up the task of repeated 65,000 psi abuse such as only the .454 Casull can dish out. The new .454 Super Redhawk even looked different from the .44 Magnum versions that came first, in that the cylinders were non-fluted and the guns were originally offered in a unique, graphite gray finish called "Target Gray." Received with mixed emotions by the gun-buying public, the finish proved tough, though its existence was accidental. Accidental how? The finish just *happened* during the parts tumbling process, and the powers that be at Ruger decided to run with it. It is no longer available, unfortunately. I am

one of those who likes the finish, as it is unlike any other offered by another factory or the aftermarket.

The Super Redhawk offered a unique opportunity to introduce a new cartridge bearing Ruger's name, the .480 Ruger, the first cartridge to ever bear the name Ruger. The .480 Ruger is, essentially, a slightly shortened .475 Linebaugh (from 1.4 inches to 1.28 inches), a cartridge well known and respected by big-game handgun hunters. Featuring a .476-diameter bullet in a range of weights, it has a SAAMI maximum pressure of nearly 48,000 psi. Ruger opted to house this chunky cartridge in a six-shot cylinder in the aforementioned 465 Carpenter steel, just as it had the .454 Casull. Unfortunately for Ruger, the release of its new cartridge came at an inopportune time, being sandwiched between Smith & Wesson's most powerful .500 Magnum and Smith & Wesson's highest velocity .460 Magnum, neither attribute of which the new Ruger cartridge could boast.



Author Photo

A pair of Ruger Super Redhawks, the top in .480 Ruger, the bottom in .44 Magnum. Both wear 7½-inch barrels.



Author Photo

The original .480 Ruger Super Redhawk in Target Gray with a 7½-inch barrel and sporting an Ultradot 30 red dot sight housed in Ruger 30mm rings.



Author Photo

The Ruger Super Redhawk in .480 Ruger features a six-shot cylinder.



Author Photo

A .44 Magnum Super Redhawk with a 7½-inch barrel, owned by Mike Leeds.

The big news, in 2013, was the re-release of the .480 Ruger Super Redhawk, after a three-year hiatus. The .480 is available on a 7½-inch Super Redhawk or the bulldog-esque Alaskan model with a 2½-inch barrel, and Ruger is marketing them with a renewed vigor. The big Rugers this time all sport a stainless steel finish. I asked Ruger why the change in finish on the non-Alaskan version, and it cited that the wear characteristics of the gray finish were not up to its standards in that once the finish became worn, the finish could not be touched up or reapplied. Since it had met with mixed reviews from the start, the decision was made to discontinue Target Gray. That said, the stainless finish looks very good.

I took delivery of two new Super Redhawks in .480 Ruger, one with a 7½-inch barrel, the other the Alaskan model with its 2½-inch barrel. Gone from the product lineup is the 9½-inch barreled version of the .480 Super

Redhawk; I personally felt that barrel length made for a cumbersome and rather unwieldy revolver, so it won't be missed by me. Even the 7½-inch version is a bit on the long side for my tastes, but I can live with it.

Hogue's excellent Tamer grips now come standard on the .480 and .454 Casull SRHs, a welcome addition; adding those grips was the first change I made to a number of SRHs I've owned in the past. The Tamer comes with an integral Sorbothane insert in the backstrap area that rests in the web of your hand, precisely where double-action revolvers deliver their punishment. They are a vast improvement over the old rubber grips with wood inserts and they feature finger grooves that improve grip consistency.

Another pleasant surprise was the creep-less trigger pull that came in at just over four pounds in single-action mode on the 7½-inch barreled version. While I didn't weigh the trigger pull of the Alaskan, it is even lighter and smoother than its longer barreled cousin. Impressive, to say the least.

The new 7½-inch .480 Ruger SRH didn't disappoint at the range, either. We fitted our Super Redhawk with an Ultradot 30 red dot sight mounted via Ruger's 30mm rings (the rings supplied with the SRH are of the 25mm, or one-inch, variety), and all loads were shot over a chronograph to get an average. Shooting factory Hornady ammo in both 325- and 400-grain flavors, the long barreled .480 returned groups that were more than satisfactory, culminating in a five-shot 50-yard group of just under 1½ inches with the 400-grain loads. The 325-grain load also proved accurate, returning a best five-shot group of .75-inch! We then shot Grizzly Cartridge's 425-grain WFN loads that are advertised at a claimed 1,200 fps. This is a *serious* big-game load! Accuracy was outstanding with this load, as well. Can't wait to work up some handloads for this revolver, as what I have seen is so promising. The .480 Ruger is back!



Photo by Anonymous

The longest barrel available on the Super Redhawk was 9½ inches. That length is no longer available.



Author Photo

This is the first prototype Super Redhawk Alaskan, built on a .44 Magnum SRH.

The Alaskan version looks ominous, with its short snout and gaping mouth. This revolver was designed with backup work in mind, particularly in bear country, where it will surely serve with distinction. Easily packable with its snub-nosed barrel, the .480 Ruger Alaskan packs a serious punch, but without all the blast of its much higher-pressure cousin, the .454 Casull Alaskan. What most impressed me with this particular revolver was the smooth factory action that broke cleanly and with minimal creep. We tested all the same loads we shot in the 7½-inch version through the Alaskan and again ran them over the chronograph. Results can be seen in the chart on page 129. My impressions were that the recoil was fairly mild, at least by my rather skewed perspective. The revolver, with the two factory loads I

shot, was very easy to control, and I feel this will make for an excellent defensive piece in the field.

Hornady's loads for the .480 proved accurate in both revolvers, save one instance. We couldn't have gotten the 325-grain load to shoot groups at 25 yards if our lives had depended on it. I was shooting patterns a 12-gauge would be embarrassed by! This is not an indictment of Hornady's 325-grain load. Quite the contrary, as I'd been able to shoot a .75-inch group with that same load through the 7½-inch Super Redhawk, excellent in anyone's book. The snub-nosed Alaskan simply didn't like that load.



Author Photo

The Ruger Super Redhawk Alaskan in .480 Ruger.



Author Photo

Larry Welch and the author wringing out a .480 SRH on the range.



Author Photo

The author testing the .480 Ruger Alaskan.

There is a common perception that short-barreled or snub-nosed revolvers are inaccurate by virtue of their short barrels. This is simply not true. The problem with short barrels usually lies with the shooter having trouble dealing with the short sight radius. Once one gets used to the abbreviated sight radius, they will find that a short barrel typically has no reflection on accuracy. This Alaskan proved accurate out of the box, comfortable to carry, and is a package I would feel good about using as a backup piece.

.480 RUGER ACCURACY TEST—7½-INCH BARREL			
Load	Advertised Velocity	Actual Velocity	Group Size
Hornady 325-grain XTP	1,350 fps	1,315 fps (avg)	.75-inch
Hornady 400-grain XTP	1,100 fps	1,083 fps (avg)	1.5 inches
Grizzly 425-grain WFN	1,200 fps	1,099 fps (avg)	2.5 inches
Grizzly 380 grain Punch	1,200 fps	1,314 fps (avg)	2 inches

[View a text version of this table](#)

.480 RUGER ACCURACY TEST—ALASKAN 2½-INCH BARREL			
Load	Advertised Velocity	Actual Velocity	Group Size
Hornady 325-grain XTP	1,350 fps	1,129 fps (avg)	"patterned" (at 25 yards)/1.5 inches (at 10 yards)
Hornady 400-grain XTP	1,100 fps	964 fps (avg)	1.5 inches (at 25 yards)
Grizzly 425-grain WFN	1,200 fps	955 fps (avg)	.90-inch (at 10 yards)
Grizzly 380-grain Punch	1,200 fps	1,124 fps (avg)	not shot for group size

[View a text version of this table](#)

Huntington's Super Street Hawk

The idea of a dedicated big-bore revolver for back-up animal defensive work is not a new one. Often, rifle hunters will carry a backup as a nod to convenience. If a finishing shot needs to be administered to an animal, or the act of field-dressing an animal precludes the use of a rifle, a revolver makes good sense.

Ruger has offered a dedicated revolver for the sole purpose of animal defense, the Ruger Alaskan. It's a Super Redhawk that has been given the "Saturday Night Special" treatment, that is, its barrel has been cut down to 2½ inches (Ruger actually cut the barrel all the way back to the frame). This revolver is essentially a large snub-nose. Ruger's factory offering is a double-action revolver, another nod to defensive use, particularly if one finds themselves in the unfortunate situation of being under an animal bent on your destruction.

Ruger's aptly named "Alaskan," comes in three chambering, the .44 Magnum, the .454 Casull, and the re-released .480 Ruger. The last actually seems the most logical choice of the three, from a recoil versus effectiveness standpoint. The .454 is downright obnoxious with a short barrel. The .44 version weighs 44 ounces, while the .454 and .480 models come in at 45 ounces. Big punch in a small package.

Jack Huntington actually built a number of "Super Street Hawks," Ruger Super Redhawks with the barrels cut back to the frame and the scope scallops filled in, back in 2003. They were featured in *American Handgunner* magazine's November 2004 issue. The resemblance to Ruger's Alaskan model Super Redhawk is uncanny.

The Ruger Alaskan can look ominous, with its short snout and gaping mouth, but, in its original 2½-inch barreled form, it is super backup for hunters and hikers in bear country. Need more? Hand off a Super Redhawk to custom 'smith Jack Huntington and let him shorten the barrel back to the frame in his "Super Street Hawk" iteration.

Ruger's Very Own .480

The .480 Ruger is, essentially, a shortened .475 Linebaugh. The first loads offered to the public did not show the true potential of this cartridge. They were also overshadowed by the aggressive marketing of the .500 Smith & Wesson Magnum and the .460 Smith & Wesson Magnum. To that end, it never really stood a chance, as it could not boast being the biggest or the fastest. What Sturm, Ruger & Company *did* create, though, is a relatively mild recoiling and

effective round that, in the author's opinion, is one of the better all-around choices for the big-game handgun hunter.

Released in conjunction with the Ruger Super Redhawk (SRH) chambered in this caliber, the big revolver was a good platform from which to debut the new round bearing the Ruger name. This is the very first cartridge to ever bear the name Ruger on its headstamp. Recoil, while expectedly stout, still pales next to the .454 Casull (a Super Redhawk stablemate) loaded to spec, and even though the .480 boasts a larger diameter. The .480 can be loaded close to the levels of the potent .475 Linebaugh, but cannot achieve the higher velocities. Don't let that fool you into thinking the .480 Ruger isn't a serious cartridge. There is no game animal walking this earth the .480 Ruger cannot comfortably take, when loaded appropriately.

Loaded to SAAMI specification pressure of just under 48,000 psi, only 2,000 psi separates the .480 Ruger from its progenitor, the .475 Linebaugh. Off the market for a number of years, I am happy to report that Sturm, Ruger & Company has brought this outstanding caliber back into production in the Super Redhawk platform



Author Photo

Ruger's very own .480 Ruger is supported by a number of ammunition manufacturers to include Hornady, Grizzly Cartridge, and Buffalo Bore. The heavy, hardcast bullet loads from Buffalo Bore and Grizzly Cartridge, and the Punch bullet load from Grizzly Cartridge, are very effective on even the largest game animals.



Author Photo

For truly large and dangerous game, Grizzly Cartridge's .480 Ruger load with 380-grain Punch bullets at 1,200 fps has no equal. The bullet will not distort on making contact with heavy bone.

I like this round. Even when loaded with heavy bullets (400-plus grains), the impulse is mild and creates more of a push than a sharp jab. Start pushing those same-weight bullets up over 1,300 fps, though, and this is where the party starts. Plus, all factory revolver offerings in .480 Ruger are of sufficient bulk to tame even the hottest .480. As a milder version of the .475 Linebaugh, what's not to like? This is a great choice for the person wanting big-bore knockdown power without debilitating recoil, and in a package that doesn't require a gun bearer. My hope is that the .480 Ruger gains popularity with the handgun hunting public. It would be a real shame to see this one fall by the wayside.

SPECIFICATIONS:	
Bullet Diameter:	.476-inch
Case Length:	1.285 inches
Overall Length:	1.650 inches
Maximum Pressure:	47,862 psi

Why Not a .480 Ruger Single-Action?

This is a common question raised on every website with a revolver section: Why hasn't Ruger built a .480 Ruger single-action?

Speculation, scientific wild-ass guessing (SWAG), conjecture, and nonsense aside, we have posed this question to some of the higher-ups at Ruger on a number of occasions.

So why not? I know of more than a few custom gun builders who routinely chamber the Blackhawk in the .480 Ruger, as well as other calibers that are more abusive, so why in the world won't Ruger do it? I have been told (quite consistently, I might add, and on a number of separate occasions), that Ruger engineers feel the Blackhawk platform is simply not up the rigors of the .480 Ruger cartridge as it stands, plain and simple. Keep in mind that Ruger has historically and consistently raised the bar to a very high standard, regarding what it feels is a comfortable margin of safety. With all that in mind, I talked about this with my good friends the Lee Martins, father and son builders of some exquisite custom revolvers. The younger Lee had this to say:

"Why not a .480 Ruger Bisley? The question has been asked *ad nauseam*, since the cartridge's introduction, in 2001. Ruger's unwillingness to oblige has nothing to do with logistics or technical acumen, but instead stems from safety. Simply put, Ruger engineers

won't give the .480 Blackhawk a passing grade — and pointing to the .480 Super Redhawk for plausibility is misguided. The Blackhawk just can't match the SRH on strength in two critical areas. More on that later, though.

“The New Model frame lineage starts with the flattop .44 Magnum. It is 15-percent larger than .357s of that era and built for .44-calibers capped at 40,000 PSI. The .480 Ruger is 0.047-inch bigger in diameter and moves the SAAMI curve to 48,000 psi. This is clearly beyond what Ruger intended for its single-action base. A five-shot cylinder makes the model feasible, but it's not an end-all. Yes, gunsmiths convert Bisleys to .475, but they do so as hand-assembled customs. They also employ features not found on Newport Blackhawks. These upgrades achieve the following: 1) they up the margin of safety, 2) they improve durability, and 3) they're mechanically required. Let's take a look at each.

“Stock 1.73-inch overall diameter (o.d.) Blackhawk cylinders with in-line bolt notches lack the girth for six rounds. By comparison, a 1.793-inch o.d. Redhawk with offset notches does. So, the foundation for a .480 Bisley *must* be a five-shot cylinder.

“It's also common for the custom crowd to mill the frame window 0.060-inch to 0.080-inch top to bottom. Five-shot 1.8-inch cylinders follow and offer the strength needed for .475/.480 strain. But five-hole cylinders are more than just cutting 72-degree cogs. The guts have to be modified, most notably the pawl, ratchet geometry, and bolt timing via the hammer plunger. Unless Ruger has a five-shot switch at the plant, significant changes to production would be necessary.

“The loading gate-to-chamber alignment on a five-shot prompts another workaround. Since the gate is directly in line with the bore, it’s fully exposed. Blowback through the throat can be severe enough to bend the gate spring and even render the gun inoperable. Ideally, you want to recess the chambers for the cartridge rim so the face is reinforced and gate float is prevented. If the cylinder isn’t counter-bored (a feature dropped, by the way, with the introduction of the New Model in 1974), all five chambers must be filled. I can’t see Ruger relying on the shooter to adopt that practice, so add recessed cylinders to the upgrade list.

“One of the most overlooked and likely reasons we won’t get a .480 Bisley is the barrel shank. Increase pressure and lower wall thickness, and longevity becomes a concern. That concern played out when Sporting Arms prototyped its .454 Magnum. Under proof, a few forcing cones cracked; this led to a .454-specific frame. Externally identical to the base Seville, the .454 version expanded the thread inlet, allowing for a larger diameter shank. Very few of these guns were produced, so it’s hard to say how they’ve held up to volume .454 use. Magnum Research lends credence to this practice, however. In switching from D-Max castings to BFR frames, the most noticeable difference was a bulked fore-end (note: the D-Max frame was pure Blackhawk).

“Ruger would also have to address frame protrusion, because, as the barrel extends into the window, it becomes unsupported. It’s hardly a weak link on the smaller calibers, but, with .475s, you have less meat encapsulating the cone. Shrouding the shank completely within the frame provides sufficient rigidity, but this adds another step. That step entails radiusing the cylinder face, so the edge can

clear the frame corners. Removing the curvature of the corners themselves achieves the same result. Neither method is difficult, but they do drive process change.

“Increased shank strength is a nice up-tick, but one that’s for naught, when the cylinder is misaligned to the bore axis. That holds for any revolver, but is especially relevant with 400-grain pills at 48,000 PSI. When projectiles of that size and pressure engage the cone off-center, they impart enormous energy to the barrel. Over time, that force can cause stress fractures. Line-boring or line-indexing are two methods that promote sound chamber-to-barrel specs. They reduce the chance of bullet tilt, nose deformation, and overall punishment to the forcing cone. Eleven-degree leads and mild free-bore can also help the bullet, as it traverses the gap. They’re no substitute for proper alignment, but these processes work well in supporting roles.



Photo by Lee Martin

A BFR forcing cone in .475 Linebaugh. You can clearly see the additional material supporting the barrel.



Photo by Lee Martin

A Blackhawk .41 Magnum forcing cone.

“So we’ve talked about the logistical ‘musts.’ What about the nice-to-haves that prolong the gun’s useful life? No doubt the recoil generated by a .480 is more violent than that of traditional revolver rounds. Bigger caliber plus bigger pressure equals more wear and tear. There’s just no way around it. So, while one of what I’m about to suggest are requisites for a .480 Bisley, but they’re recommended.

“For one, .475 barrel walls are thinner, so there’s less purchase on the ejector housing. Most customs get barrel bands to back the tube, and MRI actually glues the housing to the barrel. Second, precision-fit cylinders withstand the jarring effect better than those that exhibit end shake and side play. Start with a little wiggle and it’ll progress to

a lot of slop as the gas ring peens. The same applies to the bolt, causing many to install frame-mounted bearing blocks. Now, I have nothing against production Blackhawks. For being mass-produced, they'll take one hell of a beating. But factory cylinder fit and tolerances are just a tad lax for this big-bore, at least to my way of thinking.

“Unquestionably the .480 is major step up from the .44 Magnum, and that statement applies to design, manufacturing, and both ends of the shooting experience. Couple that with Ruger's lofty safety standards, and I think the .480 Bisley will trudge on as wish-list fodder.”

Bigger caliber plus bigger pressure equals more wear and tear — there's just no way around it. Don't get me wrong, Ruger's Blackhawk will take one hell of a beating, but the .480 Ruger is a major step up from the .44 Magnum the Blackhawk handles so well. Couple that with Ruger's lofty safety standards, and you're unlikely to see the Blackhawk factory chambered in Ruger's namesake big-bore round.



Author Photo

Ruger's space-age LCR.



Author Photo

In a more conventional revolver design, the hammer assembly and the trigger assembly are located in two separate housings. In the case of the LCR, the hammer and trigger — the “fire control center” — are located in the same fire control housing.



Author Photo

The LCR taken down.

The LCR (Lightweight Compact Revolver)

The space-age LCR is Ruger's latest revolver, one that's a marvel in design and modern materials. The letters LCR stands for "Lightweight Compact Revolver." Introduced in 2009, the polymer-framed (that's plastic!) LCR is chambered in .38 Special +P, .357 Magnum, .22 LR, and .22 WMR. It features a five-shot stainless steel cylinder in the two larger rounds, while the .22 LR is an eight-shot and the .22 WMR is a six-shot. The stainless steel barrel is a short 1.875 inches, keeping with the compact theme, the LCR has fixed sights, and it's available with rubber Hogue grips

or Crimson Trace laser grips. The frame is finished in a matte black. The little LCR tips the scales at a whopping 13 ounces!

The LCR is unique in a number of ways. In a more conventional revolver design, the hammer and trigger assemblies are located in two separate housings (e.g. in single-action revolvers, a cylinder frame and a grip frame). In the case of the LCR, the hammer and trigger — the “fire control center,” as Ruger calls it — are located in the *same* housing (the fire control housing), eliminating the increase to the tolerance stack common in conventional revolver configurations and their separate housings. By locating the entire assembly in one housing, Ruger gets a rigid, repeatable fire control system that requires no fitting or gunsmithing to achieve a best-in-class trigger pull.

CHAPTER SIX
TECHNOLOGICAL
INNOVATIONS





Author Photo

The transfer bar on a double-action.



Author Photo

The transfer bar on a single-action.

Ruger's various revolvers aren't just pretty faces getting by on their looks. They are beautiful *inside* and out. Ruger's revolvers feature a plethora of technological innovations that are often overlooked and taken for granted, and I think it's a good idea to examine a number of them and shed light upon some of the genius that is Sturm Ruger & Company and the vision of William B. Ruger.

Transfer Bar Safety System

"The Old Model lockwork is loosely patterned on the Colt Army action, though it is much improved by the use of coil springs throughout. The action cycle and handling are exactly like the Colt and, therefore, require special care for safe use. The Old Models have safety and half-cock hammer notches and cannot be safely carried with a fully loaded cylinder. The hammer must rest all the way down on an empty chamber," stated Hamilton Bowen in his excellent book, *The Custom Revolver*.

In this litigious age, the Old Model lockwork is a liability and an invitation for disaster. Firearm safety systems were, once upon a time, situated between the ears of the person handling the firearm. This seems to be missing from a large portion of the populace today, one that is eager to sue at the drop of a hat, justifiable or not. For this reason, we can rely on the fallibility of man.

Bowen wrote, "Over the years, lame gun handling killed and maimed a few careless shooters and innocent bystanders, ultimately attracting the unwarranted attention of the tort bar."

Like sharks to blood in the water.



Author Photo

The transfer bar on a Ruger Vaquero single-action revolver.



Author Photo

All Ruger double-action revolvers, since inception, have been equipped with a transfer bar safety system, such as here on this Super Redhawk.

The transfer bar system was introduced with the Security Six double-action, in 1970, and adopted for use in the single-actions, in 1973. These are the New Model revolvers, Ruger's attempt to idiot-proof its popular single-actions. The 1973 transfer bar's debut in the single-action was a radical departure from the traditional single-action revolver configuration. It is important to note that all Ruger *double*-actions, from inception, featured the transfer bar safety system.

In layman's terms, the transfer bar is a pivoting arm fixed to a lever behind the pivot of the trigger. When the trigger is pulled, the transfer bar is

held in an upward position that fills the space/void between the hammer and the firing pin, allowing the hammer's energy to be transferred to the firing pin, thereby pushing it forward into the primer. When the trigger is retracted or released, the transfer bar pivots down into a position that no longer allows the hammer to make contact with the firing pin, thus rendering the revolver completely safe and unable to fire, even with a full cylinder and severe impact directly to the hammer. It is simple, effective, and brilliant.

David Bradshaw on the Transfer Bar Safety System

In 1973, 100 years after Colt's introduced the Single Action Army — a.k.a. the Peacemaker — Bill Ruger introduced his New Model single-actions. The New Model transfer bar lockwork made the mechanism safe for carry with a round under the hammer, as the hammer cannot contact the firing pin until the hammer is cocked and the trigger pulled. The transfer bar is attached to the trigger. Upon release of the trigger, the transfer bar drops *below* the firing pin, while a square hammer nose rests against the frame. Only the transfer bar ever bears on the firing pin.

The Ruger transfer bar is a *passive* safety system. Neither hammer nor trigger is touched to load and unload the revolver. The thumb-operated loading gate in the right recoil shield (standing breach) controls the New Model lockwork:

1) LOADING GATE OPEN

- Revolver cannot be fired.
- Transfer bar locked — trigger cannot be pulled; hammer cannot be cocked.

- Cylinder latch disengaged — cylinder free to rotate.
- Cylinder may be loaded and unloaded.
- Cylinder may be removed.

2) LOADING GATE CLOSED

- Cylinder latch engaged — contacts cylinder.
- Revolver may be carried.
- Revolver may be cocked and fired.

Bill Ruger's transfer bar put the New Model on equal footing with modern double-actions, as far as being safe to carry with all chambers loaded. This alone thrust it a century ahead of the Colt single-action lock, which Ruger had copied on his first-generation single-actions. Ruger subsequently designed transfer bar lockwork to retrofit the "Old Model" guns, as Ruger aficionados call them.

What is the value of loading and unloading without manipulating the hammer and trigger? To put it country simple, there's no safety notch to manually engage and no need to align an empty chamber on which to lower the hammer.

I did not fully appreciate the advantages of the Ruger New Model until I tested the 10½-inch Super Blackhawk for the IHMSA and a couple publications, where I got to campaign it hard on steel. The sear tip of the New Model is thick, unlike the fingernail sear of the traditional single-action, and there are no fingernail notches in the hammer to go with a fingernail sear. While an exact technique is required to properly tune New Model let-off, the trigger job is straightforward for those who understand the technique.

The scene is a silhouette match, in Black Canyon, Arizona. It's hotter than the hinges of hell. I retreat to Elgin Gates' trailer to stretch, meditate, catch some cool air, check my sight dope. Robert Gates, the youngest son of Elgin and Dollie, follows me into the trailer. Elgin, cigar in teeth, says, "David, don't let anyone distract you out there. I'll take care of any emergencies. Focus."

Forward to 20 minutes before my relay takes the firing line. Robert Gates, a practical joker and compulsive extrovert built on the scale of Baby Huey, picks up my Ruger KS411N "Silver Hornpipe" 10½-inch Super Blackhawk, and *fans* it, *destroying* my trigger job! What to do, fire my spotter? Hang him? No. Just tear down the Ruger, stone the hammer and sear (I believe I used Spyderco stones, including the white ceramic type made by Coors), reassemble, and dry-fire. Nope. Repeat the process. Still nope. Tear it down a *third* time. A little more stone work. Reassemble and dry-fire the gun 25 times, then skid up to firing line, just in time to hear the command "Load!"

Perhaps because the Revolver Aggregate was on the line, the wives of two competitors took it upon themselves to follow my progress, blurting sarcasms at me on the turkey line. "Ignore them to death," said Robert Gates, who, from saboteur had switched to a superb spotter. As the heckling didn't much impede the clang of steel, the obnoxious chorus trailed off halfway into the rams. And when the KS411N collected another Revolver Aggregate win, I whispered a silent thanks to Mr. Ruger for his wonderful New Model single-action.

Pine Tree Castings

Ruger & His Guns author R.L. Wilson stated, on Ruger's foray into investment casting, "A scientific, aesthetic, financial, and technological triumph which has been a hallmark of the Ruger saga is the use of precision investment casting. With the founding of Pine Tree Castings in 1963 at the Newport facility, Ruger and his company established the vital bulwark which has proven as important as any of the manufacturing factors in the firm's domination of the firearms field."

When Ruger's very first revolver, the Single Six, was being prototyped, the frames were machined out of solid blocks of forged steel. The machining process was tricky, and it created a modicum of additional work and complications. But Bill Ruger was a smart man, a very smart man, who, from the beginning, thought that, perhaps, the frame could be cast.

In the early 1950s, Bill Ruger invested \$25,000 in a foundry called Arwood Precision Casting. Keep in mind that small gun parts had been investment-cast for decades. Ruger adapted the process to casting frames. Arwood poured the Single Six and Blackhawk cylinder frames, and a number of others, until Pine Tree Castings was formed, in 1963. Arwood also investment-cast Great Western single-action frames out of 4130 steel, starting in 1953. When Bill Ruger found out about the Great Western castings, he leaned hard on Arwood. He felt he had the right to, as he had invested in Arwood to improve the casting process — why should his competitor benefit from his investment (pun intended)? Arwood obliged Bill Ruger, and Great Western was forced to switch to Ferro Casting, out of Santa Monica, California.

Now for a bit of trivia. In those days, Roy Weatherby supplied Ruger with his early .22 barrel blanks. Ruger also used Marlin and Winchester blanks at times, in those early years. Great Western bought barrel blanks

from Roy Weatherby, too, and it was Roy Weatherby who ratted out Arwood, in a letter to Bill Ruger, in 1954.

Bill Ruger was concerned about how the average consumer would perceive a casting, as opposed to a more expensive forging. But Ruger knew that his castings would be at least as strong as the forgings the company had made and tested. Known as the “lost wax” process, investment casting came into widespread use in World War II, though its roots are much older, ancient, in fact, as it’s a technique used by the Chinese 6,000 years ago. The lost wax method produces castings that offer strength comparable to forgings. A forging *can* be stronger when it is tested along its grain direction, but a casting isn’t saddled with this limitation and is often stronger than a forging when the forging is tested across its grain.



By 1967, the Pine Tree facility was expanded to manufacture the No. 1 rifle. I would eventually make all Ruger rifles, as well as the Old Army revolver.

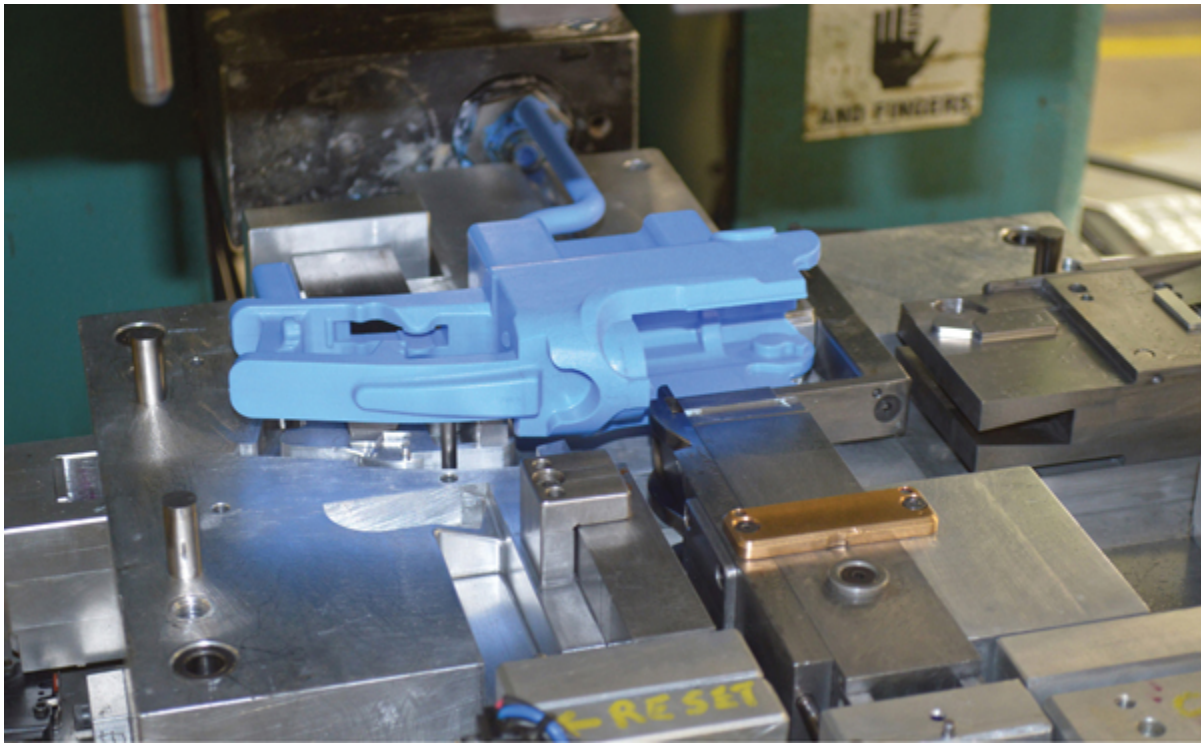
Sturm, Ruger & Company wrote the book on investment casting in the firearms industry. Pine Tree Castings, as Ruger's foundry is called, was established in Newport, New Hampshire, in 1963. It took just nine months for Pine Tree Castings to get up and running. Today, it produces parts for a number of industries. Here's a partial list of items produced by Pine Tree, to put things into perspective:

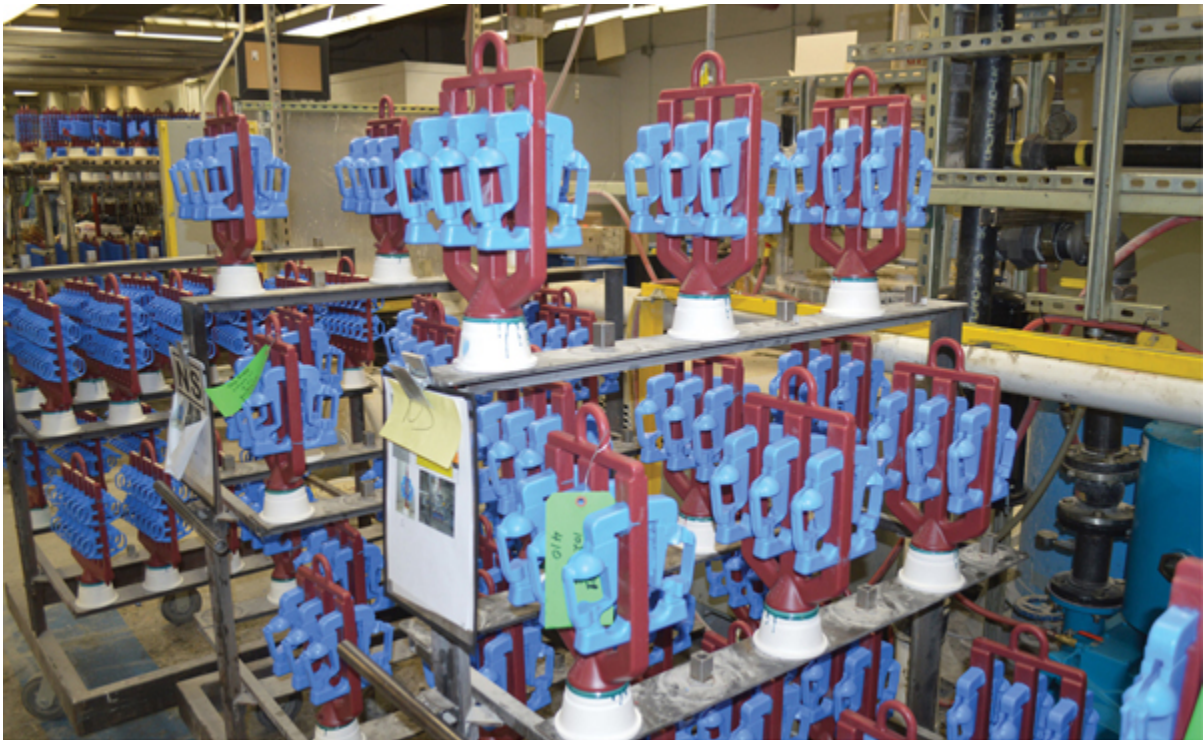
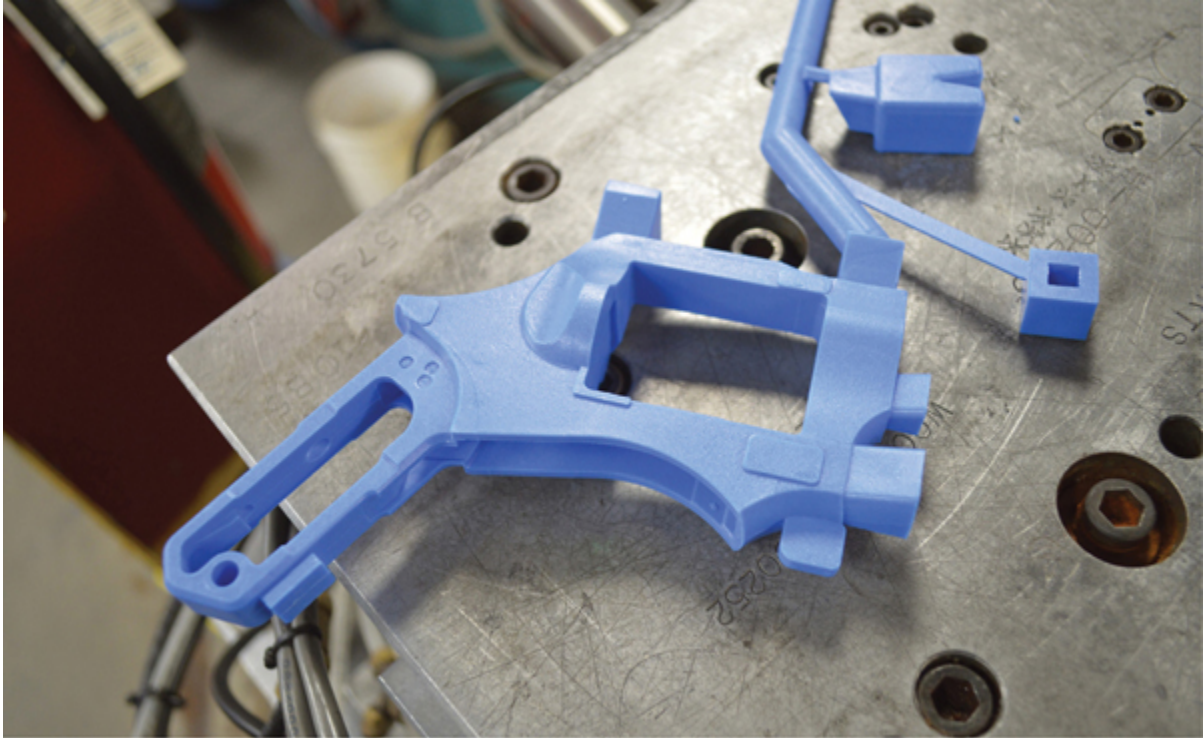
- 25 firearms manufacturers — frames, rifle receivers and bolts, pistol slides and barrels
- Rocker arms for the automotive industry
- Architectural hardware
- Nail gun parts
- Prosthetics
- Impellers for air starters (for the trucking industry)
- Railroad lock hardware
- Machine gun parts

Ruger also produces premium quality cold hammer-forged barrels in the Pine Tree facility to supply its own firearms (and a few other gun companies, as well).

For this book, I have put together a photo montage of the entire investment casting process, beginning with the creation of a wax pattern and ending with the wonderful firearms we have come to love. The process begins with injecting a wax pattern, a process very much like plastic injection molding. A number of these patterns are then attached to rods of wax, using wax as an adhesive. These groups of patterns are attached to wax rods that form a "tree," which form the interior of the mould that will be used to cast the parts. The wax pattern is then surrounded with liquid ceramic, through a dipping process. Each layer of ceramic is then covered

with a layer of sand. The process continues until a total of six to eight layers are achieved. Once dry, the ceramic-covered wax pattern is conveyed through a furnace and the wax is melted out by firing the ceramics. The moulds are then placed in an oven, where they are heated to 1,850 degrees Fahrenheit.

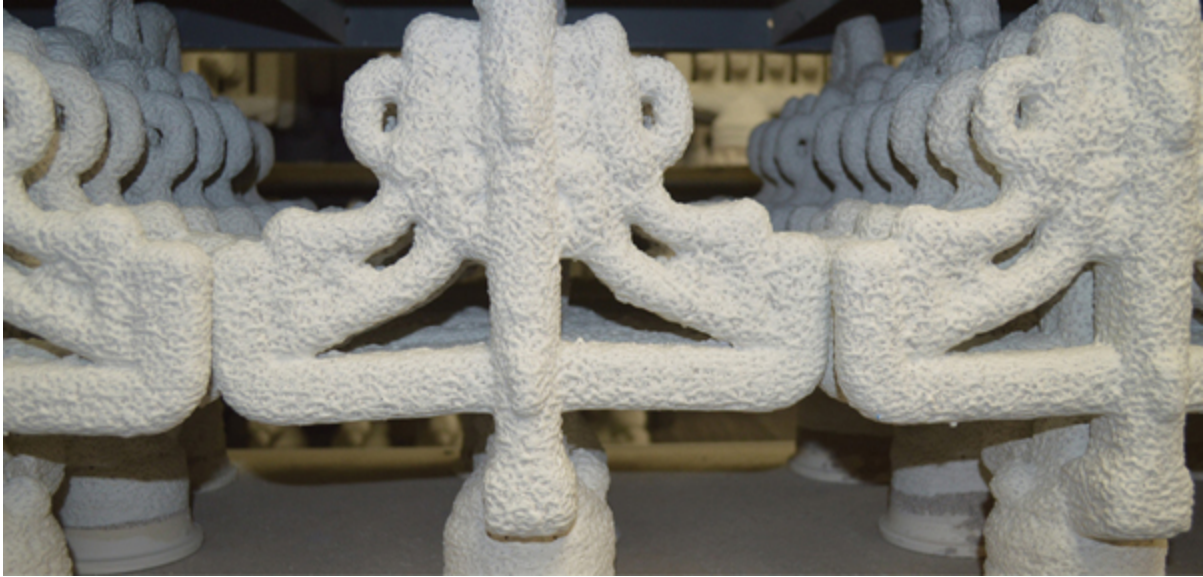














In the meantime, the steel is prepared in a furnace. The furnace is “melted in” under an argon “blanket” (cover), to keep oxygen out of the melt. The lack of oxygen keeps impurities from forming in the molten steel.

Once the moulds have achieved optimal temperature, they are pulled out of the pre-heating oven and placed on a sand bed. Steel from the furnace is poured into a ladle, then from the ladle to the mould. The moulds are immediately covered with a can. Then, nitrogen is pumped into the can. The moulds are kept a minimum of 13 minutes under this nitrogen “blanket,” which keeps the castings from scaling; this cuts down on the time needed for cleaning and polishing later in the process. The moulds are then allowed to cool down outside for anywhere from a couple of hours to days, depending on the production schedule.















Once cool, the moulds are loaded into a “knockout” machine that, like a jackhammer, literally knocks the ceramic off of the metal. Immediately following this is a jet blast of abrasive media, to remove the remaining ceramic. A caustic cleaning is up next, which removes the remaining traces of ceramic. Once the cleaning is completed, the parts are cut off of the runners.

All frames get straightened before they are sent to be heat-treated. Since carbon in alloy steel reacts to ceramic — it actually depletes — carbon is added back into the steel during the heat-treating process, which takes place in a methane atmosphere.

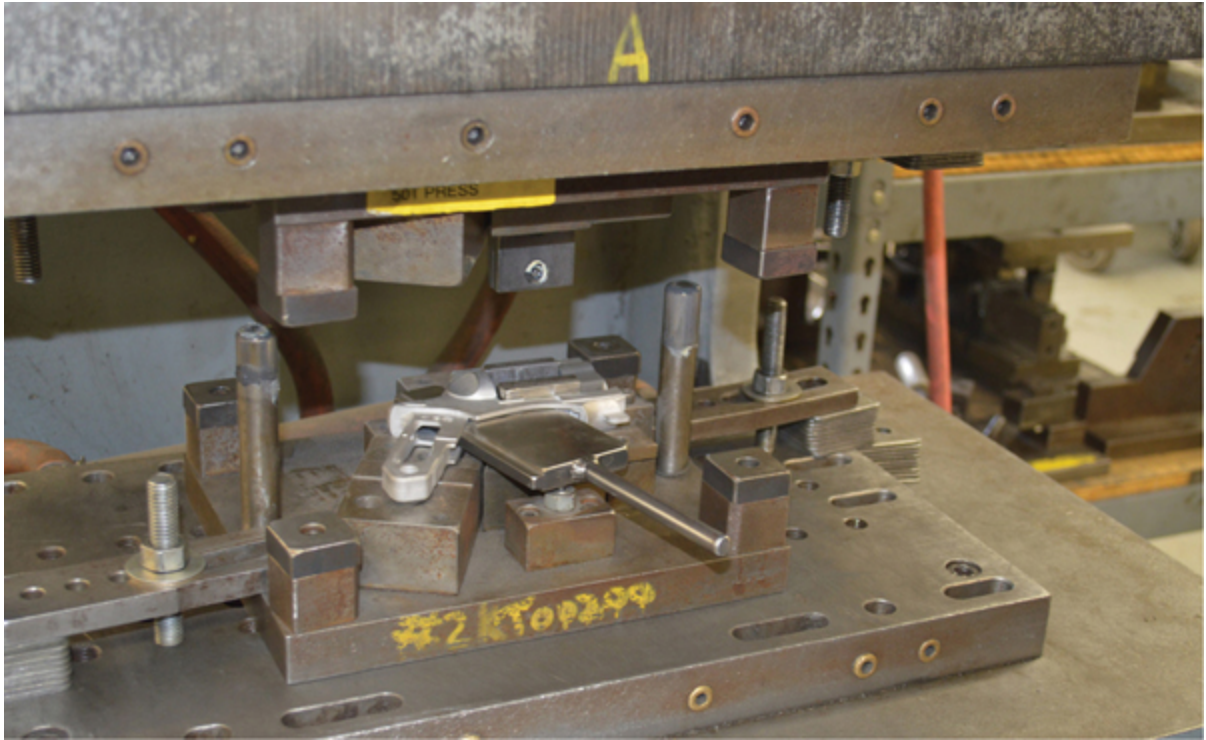
A number of the newly minted parts are X-rayed to check for voids. Critical parts are subjected to Magnaflux, a magnetic particle inspection process that highlights cracks in metal. Important dimensional features are measured for adherence to specifications, often using a coordinate measuring machine (CMM).

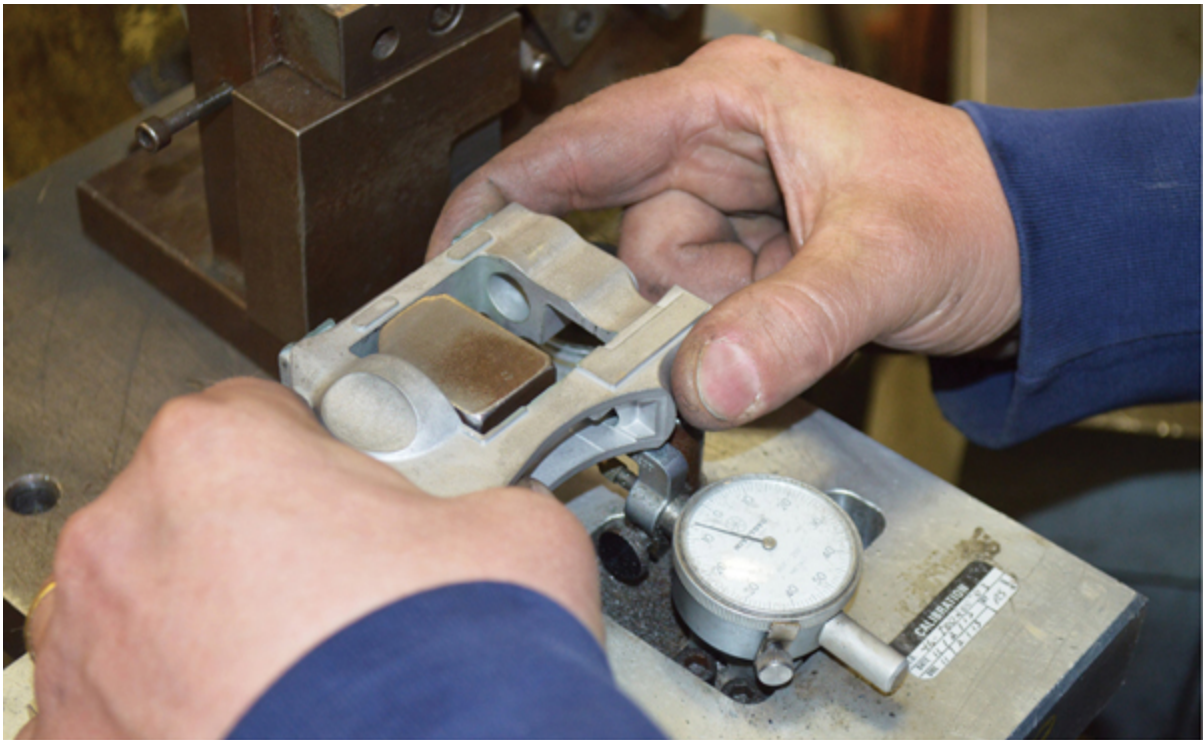
I want to note that with each bed of moulds, a chemistry sample of steel is poured for analysis. A carbon sulfur analyzer measure the points of carbon in the steel, and a spectrometer is used to determine the steel's chemistry. This is a virtual chemical quality control measure to make certain the chemical makeup of the steel follows the recipe.





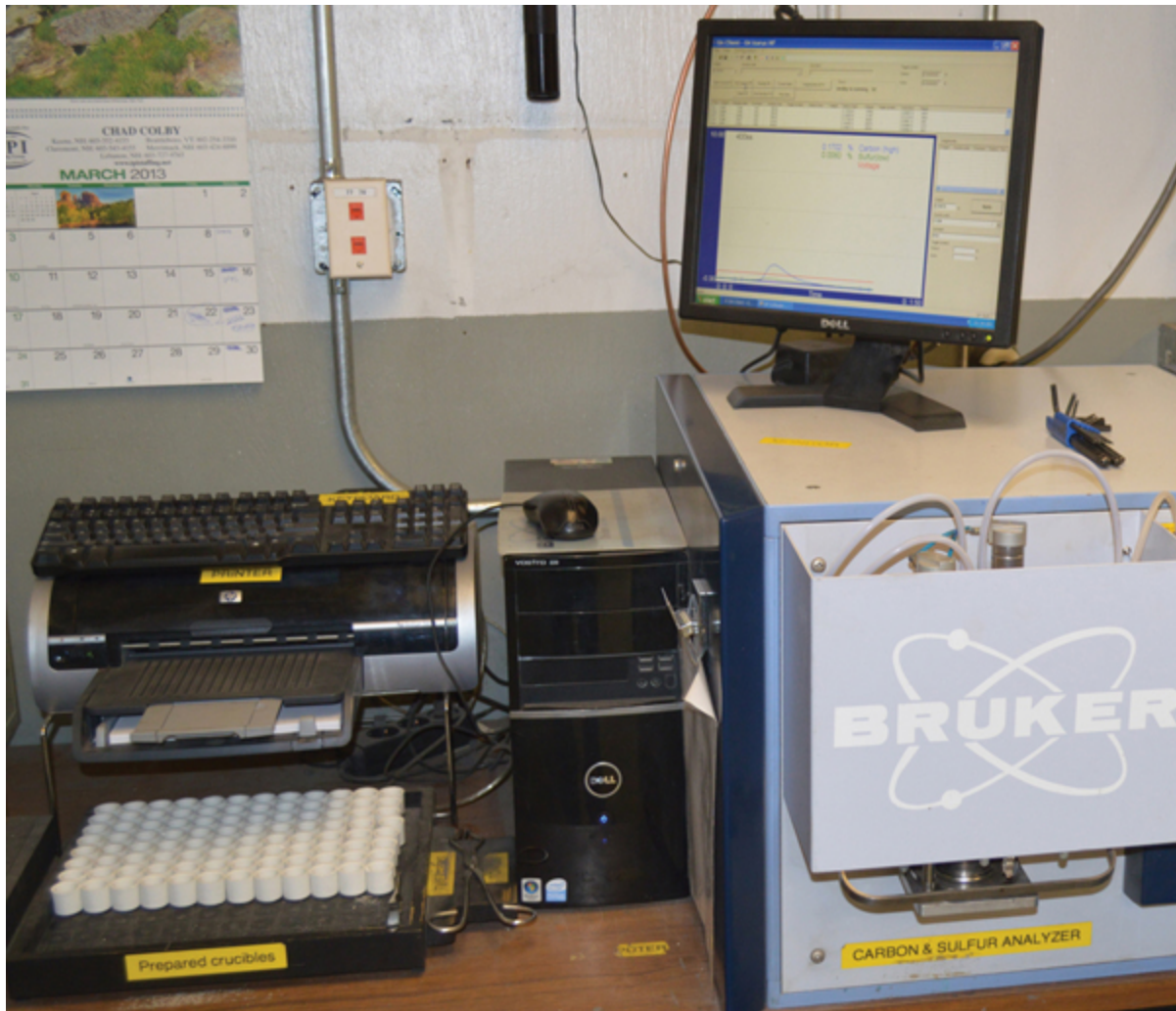












Hammer-Forged Barrels

Sturm, Ruger & Company is, in many ways, a one-stop shop. Included in its impressive array of manufacturing feats is the production of hammer-forged barrels for a variety of firearms. In this process, a mandrel with the correct rifling and the exact dimensions of the barrel is inserted into a barrel blank. The mandrel is fed into the portion that is being pounded with anywhere from 80 to 140 tons of force, depending on the machine. The 140-ton barrel machine produces 1,200 hammer strokes per minute! The entire rifling

process takes about 2½ minutes to complete, and then the barrels are cut to the length needed.

Strength in Spades

Strength is a hallmark of Ruger products, be they rifle, pistol, or revolver. Allow me to offer some anecdotal evidence, and even though this tale involves a rifle, it is a Ruger rifle and therefore a product of the company's hallmark over-engineering.

When Ruger finished prototyping a particular bolt-action rifle, the first rifle off the production line was sent to an ammunition manufacturer for testing, as that company was planning to offer a version of that rifle for commercial sale under its own banner. Like many companies in the industry, it wished to find out what were the upper pressure limits of this particular rifle model. The instructions from the boss were to blow up the rifle in laboratory conditions to find the true and unequivocal upper limit.

Loads exceeding the SAAMI maximum of the cartridge were shot with no ill effects, so loads considerably higher in pressure were next fed through this rifle. It again swallowed them, without missing a beat. This pattern was continued all the way up to 160,000 psi. At this level, the strain gage flew off, the barrel launched 20 yards downrange, but the rifle lost only a mere .002-inch of headspace. Despite a casting flaw revealed afterwards but unknown at the time of testing (there was a void in the metal), the rifle exceeded all expectations. Such is the strength of Ruger's products.

John Taffin, in his book *Big Bore Sixguns*, discussed the problems metallic silhouette shooters began experiencing with their Smith & Wesson Model 29 revolvers, when subjecting them to a high-volume of full-tilt loads. He stated:

With the coming of long-range silhouetting, shooters started pounding hundreds of rounds of full-house loads downrange in a single day. Remember Keith [Elmer] had fired his .44 magnum only 600 rounds per year! Trouble started almost immediately. When a cartridge was fired, the cylinder would unlock and rotate backwards, and when the hammer was cocked for the next shot, the fired round would be back under the firing pin. About the same time, silhouetters were shooting huge amounts of 240-grain bullets, and handgun hunters discovered 300-grain bullets, which put further strain on the mechanism whose basic design went back to 1899.

Taffin also wrote:

Finally, with a change in management, Smith & Wesson began to address some of the problems associated with the .44 Magnum Model 29. By now, Ruger and Dan Wesson had heavy-duty .44 Magnum sixguns on the market that were designed around heavy usage. Smith engineers went to work. The retention system on the yoke, or cylinder crane, was strengthened, and studs within the frame were radiused to help remove metal stress. Cylinder notches were made longer to prevent the bolt from jumping out of notch upon recoil The result is a sixgun that is probably a mite stronger and tougher, but remember, the cylinder and the frame are still the same size as found on the Triple-Lock of 1908.

This is by no means an indictment of Smith & Wesson and its classic Model 29. They were and are fine revolvers, but the design dates back to a time when the guns weren't subjected to the level of abuse meted out by not only the .44 Magnum as a cartridge, but also by silhouette shooters who took that abuse to new highs by pushing the guns and loads to levels never

intended by the factory — if there is a weak link, silhouette shooters will find it.

When all is said and done, the strength of Ruger revolvers has become the stuff of legend. This is a topic that many revolver enthusiasts find interesting, and I am no exception. Ruger revolvers are over-engineered, meaning they are built with a sizeable extra margin of strength, for safety. Some notable examples of Ruger strength are the much vaunted Redhawks, first introduced in 1979 and chambered in .44 Magnum. I have heard the term “clunky,” in association with the Redhawk and on more than a few occasions, but I like to think the term “armored” is more appropriate. Yes, relative to other double-action revolvers chambered in .44 Magnum, the Redhawk is a bit on the heavy side, but therein lies the beauty of its design. You can load the Redhawk with caution thrown to the wind (and, no, I am not suggesting you deviate from accepted loading data), but you can safely load at the very bottom of every loading manual page and fear no debilitating effects. You would be very hard-pressed to shoot a Redhawk loose, and that cannot be said of Ruger’s competitors’ revolvers. How I know this, and by example, I would like to start with the case of the late gunsmith Andy Cannon.

The Cannon Effect

The late gunsmith Andy Cannon is largely credited with producing the first .454 Casull-chambered Redhawk revolvers, somewhere in the mid- to late 1980s. The young (at the time) gunsmith Jack Huntington read about Andy Cannon’s conversions in the pages of the popular gun press in the ’80s and thought, “Why not?”

The .454 Casull became legitimized with the introduction of the Freedom Arms Model 83, in 1983. The news of its release swept over the masses, igniting a frenzy of interest by power-crazed revolver junkies. Jack Huntington was one of those big-bore power fiends and, fortunately for him, had the means, skill, and machinery to build such a monster, having created a number of five-shot, big-bore, single-action revolver conversions in the past. (And by the way, let me emphasize that I am not in any way advocating this procedure be performed, I am simply reporting my findings and experiences.)

Jack began by acquiring a Redhawk and a Super Redhawk, both chambered in .44 Magnum, to serve as test platforms for .454 conversions. After the initial teardown was performed, Jack proceeded to build the tooling necessary to test precision alignment from the chambers to the barrel — and what he discovered during this process was telling. Not only were these two revolvers precise in their construction, they were also consistent from gun to gun in subsequent testing. It was a pleasant surprise for the young gunsmith and a testament to Ruger's build quality.

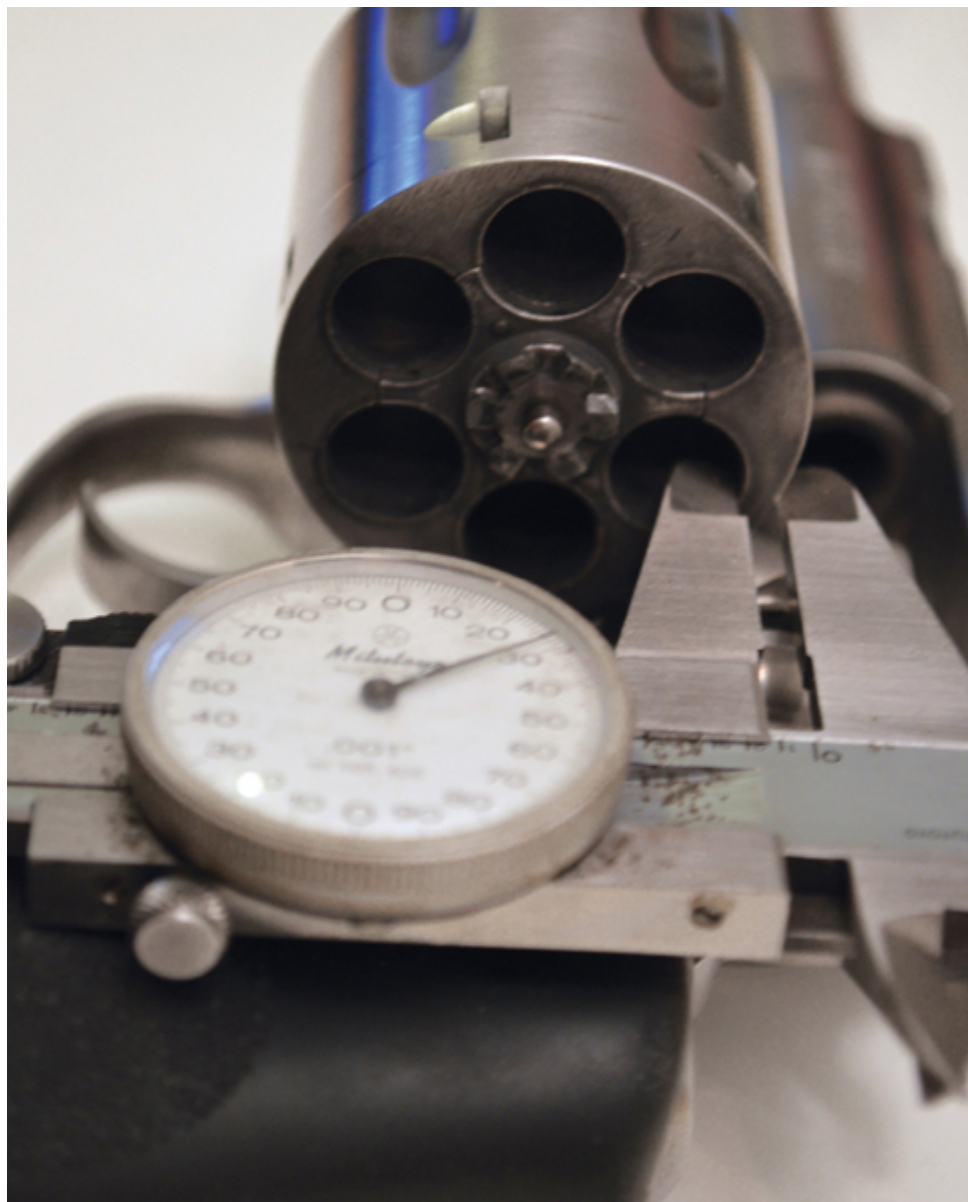
Huntington rebarreled and rechambered the two revolvers in .454 Casull, utilizing the stock six-shot cylinders. Prior to rebarreling the cylinders, Huntington had the two (made from 416 stainless steel) tested for hardness. It was revealed they had a hardness of 32 Rockwell, which Jack felt was within a safe margin for the exercise ahead. The fact that Andy Cannon made no reports of failure with his own .454 Redhawk conversions (that we are aware of), also helped untether Huntington from any reservations he may have had, and so on he plowed.

The next phase, after screwing the two revolvers together, was the attempt to reduce both revolvers to shrapnel, using only magnum-type powders from 2400 to H110. The two revolvers were subjected to "blue

loads” numbering in the hundreds — Jack was unable to hurt either firearm. The testing actually began with the revolvers affixed to a tire and then remotely fired. This was the same methodology used by Dick Casull when he was initially testing his five-shot Colt Single Action Armys in his hot-loaded version of the .45 Colt. Eventually, it became clear that there was not going to be a catastrophic failure and the remainder of the testing was performed by hand.

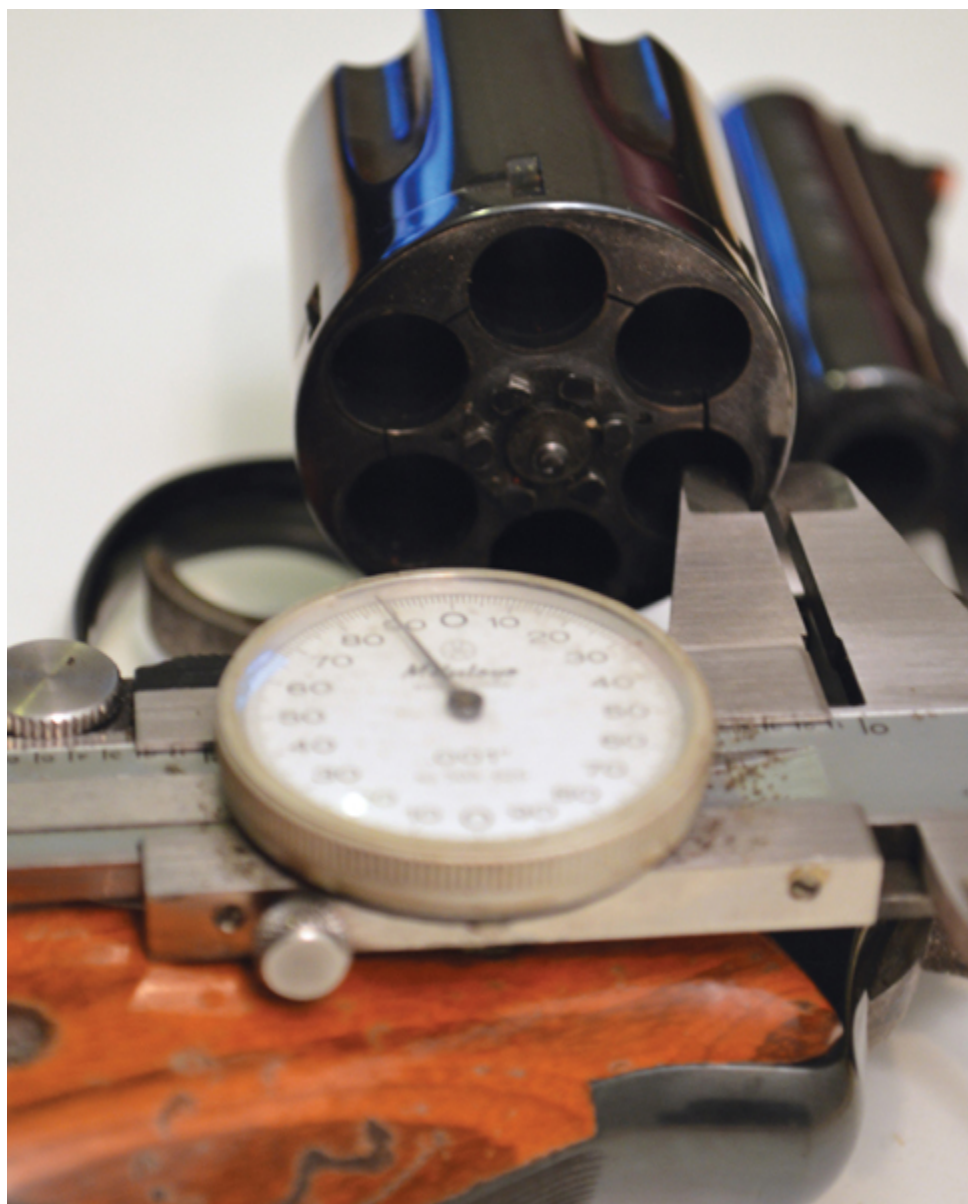
I managed to get my mitts on the very first Redhawk (the one we just spoke of) so chambered by Jack Huntington, which has been owned by Don Sharon since its inception. After decades of further heavy-load abuse, including a hunting trip to Africa, where a number of large animals were dispatched, I am happy to report this revolver seems to be no worse for the wear.

Taking delivery of the Redhawk after the many years since it had left his shop, Huntington took all vital measurements to see if the gun had suffered any damage or premature wear, such as frame stretch, through the course of a tough shooting life. Jack found no changes or signs of wear (other than what is to be considered normal), indicating that the Redhawk as conceived by Ruger’s engineering team is nothing short of spectacular. All measurements taken were the same as the day the machine work and assembly had been performed. Even the Gunkote finish that had been applied *25 years prior* seemed to show no real signs of wear — a remarkable and quite attractive finish!



Author Photo

The Redhawk/Super Redhawk .44 Magnum cylinder features offset bolt notches that allow for more steel around each chamber.



Author Photo

Compared to the cylinder of the Redhawk in .44 Magnum, the Smith & Wesson Model 29 is, dare I say, spindly.



Author Photo

Inspired by the conversions of the late gunsmith Andy Cannon, this Jack Huntington-built .454 Redhawk features a rebored .44 Magnum cylinder and an aftermarket barrel. This revolver was built 25 years ago and is as tight now as the day it was created, despite years of full-house .454 Casull loads.

I took advantage of the situation and put Don Sharon's .454 Redhawk through its paces. Despite years of use, I found that it still shot exceptionally well and the revolver felt as tight as any Ruger Redhawk fresh off of the assembly line.

For expediency's sake I shot nothing but factory loads, testing CorBon's 325-grain JFP (advertised at 1,550 fps); Hornady's 300-grain JHP (advertised at 1,650 fps); Grizzly Cartridge's 300-, 335-, and 360-grain loads (advertised at 1,650, 1,550, and 1,450 fps, respectively); Barnes VOR-TX ammo loaded with its excellent 250-grain XPB bullet (at an advertised 1,700 fps); and Double Tap Ammunition's 360-grain loads

(advertised at 1,500 fps). I found the accuracy acceptable with all ammunition tested, and actually outstanding with a couple loads.

Like other double-actions in large calibers, this Redhawk was no exception in meting out punishment. Double-action revolvers recoil straight back into the web of the hand and, as it is with this author's own semi-custom .454 Redhawk, the recoil is sharp and punishes your shooting hand, particularly with the loads wearing heavier bullets. The Pachmyr grips do a good job of helping the shooter control this beast.

One note worth mentioning is that the cases from every single load tested — and I shot more than 100 full-house loads in one session — extracted with minimal effort. In fact, all the cases simply fell out when the cylinder was upended.

I have absolute confidence in this revolver handling anything and everything thrown at it, as far as loads are concerned (accepted, *published* loads, that is, and factory ammo). And I still would like to see Ruger offer a Redhawk in .454 Casull; it would have been as simple as fitting the .454 cylinder from the Super Redhawk line into the sleeker Redhawk. Maybe, someday

Proof Testing

Virtually all of Ruger's revolvers are tested with a cylinder full of "proof" loads. What are proof loads? They are specially developed loads, manufactured by a number of companies, that are a fixed percentage higher in pressure than the SAAMI maximum pressure of any given cartridge. They are designed to test the strength of a firearm, with a known pressure level. The proof loads Ruger uses are standard proof loads of 50-percent over SAAMI maximum pressure. Let's do the math: If a .454 Casull has a SAAMI specified maximum pressure of 65,000 psi, the proof loads must

generate roughly 92,000 psi of revolver-destroying pressure — *and each and every Ruger revolver is fed a cylinder full of proof loads as part of the inspection/testing process, before the revolver is cleaned and boxed up for retail.*

In proof testing, the revolver is placed in a fixture much like a Ransom Rest, which fires the gun remotely in a box that acts as a blow shield (one that's similar to a scatter shield on a race car and meant to contain the clutch in the unfortunate event of a catastrophic failure). Not all revolver manufacturers are as devoted or as rigorous with their strength-testing regimen as Sturm, Ruger & Company is. I reiterate — *all* Ruger revolvers are subjected to a full cylinder of proof loads. Ruger takes the durability and safety of its revolvers (as it does all its firearms) very seriously. Of course, Ruger emphatically warns against shooting loads beyond SAAMI maximum pressure, or any handloads for that matter. But it's good to know Ruger puts the effort into making and ensuring that each gun was built properly.

454 Reasons for a Strong Revolver: The Casull Factor

Dick Casull really needs no introduction, in the realm of high-powered revolvers. The cartridge bearing his name, the .454 Casull, was a game changer in the revolver industry.

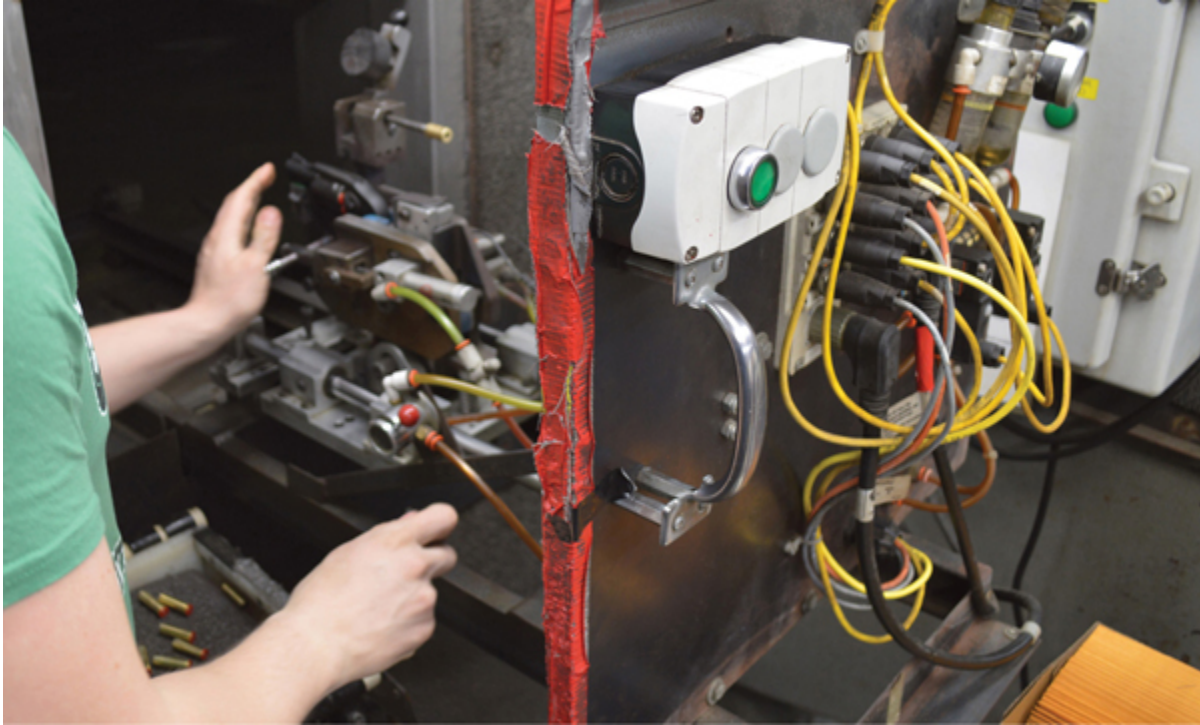
Born and raised in Salt Lake City, Utah, Dick was forced, as a teen, following World War II, to help put meat on the family table, by pressing his hunting skills into service. Dick reported that, in those days, it was much cheaper to acquire an old Colt Single Action Army than a much more expensive rifle; before long, he was taking game with a revolver chambered in .32-20. But that little cartridge left a lot to be desired on large game like

deer, and that moved Dick towards the most logical of caliber choices, the .45 Colt — and a brush with the hand of destiny.



Author Photo

A .44 Magnum cylinder rebored to .454 Casull. While the author can't condone the process, it has been done successfully.



Here, a technician mounts the revolver in a rest for proof testing. The guns are all fired remotely.

By 1953, Dick had begun experimenting heavily with .45 Colt loads, wanting to make the old warhorse even more than it was, as he'd recognized its potential early on. Discussing this with a friend, Dick realized that, if he constructed a five-shot cylinder for the Colt Single Action Army, he could raise the pressures of his .45 Colt loads and significantly increase the velocity potential. He would also make the cylinder a bit larger in diameter, filling up the Colt's frame window, which he opened up a bit.

A self-taught machinist, Dick built his first five-shot cylinder of 4110 bar stock on a lathe. He also blew up a number of Colt SAAs, trying to find the upper limits of their strength. Later, he began fooling with triplex loads, as the gunpowder offerings in those days were rather limited. By layering different powders with different burn characteristics and rates (Unique, 2400, and Bullseye, to be exact), Dick was able to launch a 230-grain jacketed bullet (designed for the .45 ACP) to nearly 2,000 fps! This

represented quite a personality makeover and jump in performance for the old blackpowder cartridge.



Author Photo

Each and every revolver manufactured by Ruger is proof tested on a range in a box like this that protects the testers in the event of a catastrophic failure. The revolvers receive a full cylinder of full-proof loads.

In the 1960s, while working for Rocky Mountain Arms, Dick met the future of the big-bore revolver community. An entrepreneur by the name of

Wayne Baker came into Dick's workplace and struck up a conversation with him. Through the course of that conversation, Dick told Wayne of his plans and designs for an all-new single-action revolver built around his hot-rodded .45 Colt cartridge. Wayne saw the brilliance and potential in Dick and tried talking him into moving to Wyoming, to help him set up shop and build Dick's revolver design.

Dick eventually showed his design plans to Wayne Baker, and Wayne decided he wanted to build it. In 1975, Dick and his wife made the move from Utah, to Freedom, Wyoming, and Wayne and Dick began their business. They initially produced mini-revolvers of Dick's design, then combined efforts to create the Freedom Arms Model 83. Released in 1983 in the raucous .454 Casull chambering, the rest is, as they say, history.

Back in the February 1966 issue of *Guns & Ammo* magazine, there appeared an article penned by a William Calder. In that article, Calder told of paying a visit to Dick Casull, in which he'd brought along a Ruger Blackhawk frame that was to be converted to a five-shot .45 Colt. Back then, Dick's .45 Colt loads would chuck a 250-grain bullet (of hard lead with linotype), up to 1,500 fps with a stiff load of 2400. The purpose of the article was to show that it could be done and that, at that time, there was no better or stronger platform on which to build such a conversion, than Ruger's full-sized Blackhawk.

My good friends the Lee Martins built a Blackhawk in .454 Casull, in 1996. It has been fed a steady diet of heavy .454 loads to the tune of 5,000 rounds, in its 17 years of existence. It has not led a charmed life. Despite nearly two decades of abuse, the frame hasn't budged or grown by even a thousandth of an inch. Ruger revolvers are tough.

Dick Casull on Bill Ruger

Dick recalled a conversation he'd had with Bill Ruger way back when, as they'd sat down for coffee one day. Bill, knowing Dick had plans to build revolvers of his own design, advised, "You have to do it all yourself, if you want to do it right." What he meant was that, in manufacturing, you must have control over every process to have complete control over the end product. Instead of worrying about the castings a foundry is making for you, you should do it all in-house. These are the words Bill Ruger lived by.

Dick stated, "I liked the Ruger better than the Colt's, as the frame window was bigger, allowing for a larger cylinder with more steel, and the Rugers were simply stronger than the Colt's."

The cylinder material used by Dick was 4150 bar stock that he sent to Western Rock Bit, of Salt Lake City, Utah, to have heat-treated. The revolver was line-bored and finished with a 1:24 twist barrel made by none other than P.O. Ackley. (As a side note, a 1:16 twist was tested and found not to shoot nearly as well as the 1:24 twist barrel.)

But why the .45 Colt over the more modern .44 Special? For one, though it seems that only .001-inch separates the .44 from the .45, that really isn't the case. The .44, both Special and Magnum versions, actually displaces a .429-inch bore size, whereas the .45 Colt has a full .452-inch bore, so it's .023-inch that actually separates the two families of cartridges, a much more significant size differential. Moreover, Dick Casull stated that, when he began experimenting with the .45 Colt, the brass was a better, higher quality than that of the commercial .44 Special brass of the day, thereby better lending itself to the higher pressure levels Dick Casull was regularly visiting.

As I've said, Dick's experimentation and, ultimately, his final design for his high-performance .45-caliber cartridge were industry game changers. Dick Casull's .454 Casull raised the bar for firearms manufacturers, challenging them with new design parameters and standards that forced those makers to think outside the box to safely and repeatedly contain the abuse this cartridge can mete out. This leads us back to Ruger and the company's foray into building a better .454 — and the industry's only *six-shot* .454 Casull.

The Carpenter Saga

The introduction of the .454 cartridge to the Super Redhawk lineup called for something a bit different. Ruger wanted to maintain a traditional six-shot configuration, instead of the “normal” five-shot design found in other production revolvers chambered in the high-pressure .454 Casull round (there is, roughly, a 30,000 psi increase in pressure, moving from the .44 Magnum to the .454 Casull). The challenge was presented by then company president Bill Ruger, Jr., to use the best materials available and make this idea a commercial reality.

The standard 410 stainless steel was tested and found not to meet the strict standards long established by Ruger. Ruger engineers next consulted Carpenter Technology Corporation metallurgist Humberto Raposo, for his assistance in selecting appropriate materials that would stand up to the rigors of the .454 cartridge. Raposo suggested Carpenter's then-new custom 465 stainless steel. Ruger accepted Carpenter Technology Corporation's suggestion and machined a cylinder from that custom 465 stainless steel. Ruger purportedly had a devil of a time boring the chambers, so tough was the material.

Proof loads were created that generated a monumental 92,000 psi of pressure, nearly 30,000 psi over the already astronomical SAAMI

specification pressure of the .454 Casull. But the .454 SRH wasn't subjected to just a few proof loads. Rather, in typical Ruger fashion, a full *300 loads* were tested — that's 50 rounds per chamber! No measurable damage was inflicted.



Author Photo

The only other revolver cylinder in Ruger's inventory to be made from 465 Carpenter steel is the Ruger Super Redhawk in .480 Ruger.



Author Photo

This cylinder is out of a Super Redhawk in .454 Casull, which was machined out of special steel called 465 Carpenter (by Carpenter Steel). This steel allowed Ruger to make its Casull-chambered revolver a six-shot, instead of the “normal” five-shot.

The .454 Casull

In the early 1950s, while Elmer Keith was hot-rodding the .44 Special, Dick Casull turned his attention to the .45 Colt and building special five-shot cylinders on Colt SAA revolvers. In those days, with

limited gunpowder options, one had to get creative in order to achieve high velocities. Dick was able to get nearly 2,000 fps out of a 230-grain jacketed bullet (one designed for use in the .45 ACP round), by loading two grains of Unique, 25 grains of H2400, and three grains of Bullseye on top. At the time, highly compacted triplex loads were the only path to achieving the pressures necessary to reach the velocities sought. Today's manufacturers of .454 Casull ammunition have remained true to the original design parameters, offering some exceptionally high-velocity loads (for a revolver round), although the pressures have been dialed back a bit from the SAAMI specification of a 65,000 psi maximum.

The Casull shines with heavy-for-caliber bullets, though care must be taken when loading them at higher velocities, as such recipes have a propensity for testing the integrity of the crimp. The .454 will also test the integrity of bullet construction, when loaded to full SAAMI potential.



A wide range of loads and bullets are available from a variety of quality amm manufacturers for both the power-house .454 Casull and the .44 Rem. Mag. Something for everyone!

In 1983, the Freedom Arms Model 83 made its debut in Dick Casull's souped-up .45-caliber cartridge. Never before had such a high-pressure revolver round been produced, nor a gun that could live under the abuse generated by it. Other manufacturers like Ruger and Taurus followed suit years later with their own revolvers chambered in .454 Casull, as this round required a revolver of much stronger construction than any made for the .44 Magnum. This was not only because of the higher pressures, but also because Dick Casull specified a longer case than the standard .45 Colt, so as to prevent the accidental (or merely idiotic) use of .454 Casull ammunition in .45 Colt revolvers of inadequate strength. Additionally, Casull specified a Small Rifle primer pocket, to strengthen the head

of the case (by virtue of leaving more material in this spot, due to the smaller pocket). There is a common perception that the Small Rifle primer was chosen to aid in the ignition of the high-pressure compacted charges. This is not true.

I think of the .454 Casull as the .378 Weatherby of the revolver world, as neither caliber is really pleasant to shoot, when loaded to spec. The .454 Casull generates horrendous recoil and has caused its fair share of disability. Most .454 Casull ammunition manufacturers load the cartridge short of its full velocity and pressure potential. Still, it is paper ballistics that sell ammunition, and even loaded down a bit, the .454 can still boast potent numbers. Modern smokeless powders are also more efficient, aiding in velocity generating potential without the higher pressures of the past. There is no other commercially available revolver cartridge that has a maximum SAAMI pressure specification as high as the .454 Casull, though the .460 and .500 Smith & Wesson Magnums come close (within 3,000 psi).

While the .454 Casull is no longer the biggest and baddest of commercial or even wildcat revolver cartridges, it unequivocally snatched the crown off the .44 Remington Magnum's head, back in 1983, when it became a commercial reality with the release of the Freedom Arms Model 83, and it wasn't until years later that the champion was challenged for "most powerful" honors. The .454 Casull is still a force to be reckoned with and a hard caliber to beat.

SPECIFICATIONS:	
Bullet Diameter:	.452-inch
Case Length:	1.398-inches
Overall Length:	1.765-inches
Maximum Pressure:	65,000 psi

CHAPTER SEVEN

CUSTOM RUGERS



I would like to start this chapter on custom Ruger revolvers with a quote from the preeminent custom gun builder Hamilton S. Bowen, from his terrific book *The Custom Revolver*:

Revolvers from Sturm, Ruger & Co. have been popular fodder for custom revolver 'smiths from the moment the first ones rolled off the assembly line nearly 50 years ago. Thanks to sound basic engineering, good materials, reasonable prices, and plentiful supply, the ubiquitous Ruger revolvers are the mainstays of the custom trade to this day.

More true words about the popularity of Ruger revolvers as foundations for custom projects have never been spoken. No single revolver make is more popular for customization and conversion by any number of gunsmiths than Ruger's various offerings. Rugers are the small-block

Chevy of the revolver world. There is nothing that hasn't been done to a Ruger revolver, nor anything that can't be done to a Ruger revolver, given adequate funds and skill.

While somewhat rough out of the box, something that is to be expected from a mass-produced firearm at this price point, Ruger revolvers lend themselves to myriad modifications limited only by your imagination, the capabilities of your chosen gunsmith, and the depth of your pockets. A Ruger revolver, particularly the Blackhawk, is a blank piece of canvas awaiting the application of imagination, talent, and skill, something the featured gunsmiths in this chapter have in abundance.

It is no secret I have a healthy (or is that unhealthy?) obsession with custom revolvers, especially big-bores. It seems that the more damage they are capable of inflicting on the shooter, the more attractive I find them. There is something wholly satisfying about being able to control a powerful round that is barely being harnessed by three pounds of steel. I guess it would be the shooting equivalent of controlling a bucking bronc or riding a bull in a rodeo and not getting bucked off or stomped or gored to death. (Perhaps I need psychological help!) That said, they are an object of beauty when tastefully done and nicely finished. I can remember, in college, writing to John Linebaugh and Hamilton Bowen about their big-bore creations and receiving their respective catalogs — and I haven't been the same since. It's a wonderful hobby, but one I cannot recommend unless you are prepared to let it take over your life — I speak from experience!.

I spoke with a number of well-known custom gunsmiths, as well as some not so well-known but very talented 'smiths, to find out what it is they like about Ruger's wheelguns for their custom creations. You will notice a bit of redundancy in their responses, as they pretty much all agree on a number of

fairly obvious reasons as to why Ruger is No. 1 in the custom revolver trade.

Jason Menefee, JRH Advanced Gunsmithing

Hailing from Placerville, California, Jason has been working at JRH Advanced Gunsmithing for eight years and specializes in handguns. Upon certification, Jason took a job with Ljutic Shotguns, in Yakima, Washington, as its service manager, before moving back to northern California, to work with Jack Huntington. After a rigorous apprenticeship under Jack to supplement his formal gunsmithing education at Lassen College of Susanville, California, Jason is eminently qualified to espouse the virtues of the single-action revolvers he works on the most, Ruger revolvers. Jason's skills include five-shot caliber conversions.

When I spoke with Jason about why he prefers Rugers, he made a list of 10 reasons, broken down into two halves. He told me the first five relate to the basic, unmodified platform, the next five to customization. They include:

1. Cost — Ruger single-action revolvers are fairly inexpensive.
2. Availability — At a time when semi-autos and double-action revolvers are flying off of retail shelves, he still sees Ruger single-actions in abundance, new or used, in gun shops.
3. Reliability — Because of their inherent design simplicity, thanks to few moving parts and good materials, Ruger revolvers are reliable.



Photo by Jason Menefee

A Blackhawk in .500 JRH by Jason Menefee, featuring a 4½-inch octagon barrel with an integral rib and a custom white bar front sight (by Menefee), flat-topped frame, Smith & Wesson J-frame rear sight, reshaped XR3-RED grip, bird's-eye maple grips (by Menefee), modified Super Blackhawk hammer, and a five-shot fluted cylinder with blackpowder chamfer and click ratchet. It is finished in case color hardening by Turnbull.



Photo by Jason Menefee

Another view of Jason Menefee's stunning Blackhawk in .500 JRH.



Author Photo

Aftermarket parts like this excellent Belt Mountain No. 5 base pin are worthwhile additions to any single-action revolver, allowing for a more positive cylinder lockup.



Photo by Lee Martin

A Martin custom Blackhawk in .454 Casull with Carl Schultz grips. This revolver has endured much abuse, to the tune of thousands of full-bore .454 Casull loads.

4. Parts availability — Either from Ruger or Brownell's, as well as numerous other parts houses throughout the country, you can usually find the replacement parts you need.

5. Safety — Ruger's transfer bar makes it safe to carry hammer down on a loaded cylinder.

6. Aftermarket parts — There is a wide range of quality parts, such as rings and bases, optics, sight bases, different types of sights, grips, hammers, triggers, base pins, ejector rods, etc.

7. Versatility — The Ruger can be made for hunting, target shooting, or just plinking. They can be made for packing for protection against

dangerous animals or even for home- or personal-defense use.

8. Wide range of cartridge choices — From small rimfires to full-house .500s, the choices are almost endless.

9. Bulk in proper places — Because the Rugers have such a strong frame, they can be opened up to accept larger five-shot cylinders for the truly big cartridges.

10. Perfect platform for artistic expression — The Ruger can be struck and polished to any level. There are numerous choices of finishes: stainless, color case, bluing, hard chrome, etc. Custom grips can be made out of all kinds of wood, horn, or man-made materials (like Micarta). The gun can be engraved to any level. Full customs lend themselves to personalization.



Photo by Lee Martin

The .327 Martin Meteor by the Lee Martins.

The Lee Martins

Hailing from Northern Virginia, Doctor Lee Martin, Jr., and son, Lee Marin III, built their first five-shot Ruger conversion, right around 1990. They first machined a dummy cylinder of aluminum, to see how feasible the exercise would be. From there, they never looked back and now have churned out dozens of custom revolvers in numerous calibers, including a number of their own designs.

The senior Martin, a medical doctor by profession, is also an accomplished machinist. It all began with him building his own custom Mauser 98s in his basement machine shop in the late-'60s, then progressing to custom Contender barrels in the late 1970s and, ultimately, building his own benchrest rifle actions in the late '80s.

The younger Lee Martin, a professional in the telecom field, had the following to say:

We started converting single-actions in the early 1990s, and the platform was never a decision point. The Ruger Blackhawk offered the strength, size, and configurations required to handle any round within reason. It even provided the girth to house cartridges that stretch some folks' notion of "sensible." Too, the groundwork had already been laid. Gunsmiths like John Linebaugh and Hamilton Bowen were morphing Blackhawks into the ultimate lead-flingers. If the .44 Magnum set the industry ablaze with 240-grain bullets at 1,500 fps, what should we think about 450s at 1,300?



Photo by Lee Martin

A Martin custom Blackhawk in .500 Linebaugh, with Bisley grip frame.

Handgun performance made a quantum leap forward in the short span of 30 years. Like Smith & Wesson's N-Frame from the 1950s, the Ruger Blackhawk was there from the start. But unlike the Smith & Wesson, Ruger became the foundation for increased power. Smith finally caught up, in 2002, with its massive X-Frame. They're stout guns and come complete with flashy muzzle energy and trajectory tables, both of which market well. But, when it comes to portability ... uh, enough said.

My dad purchased his first Blackhawk, in 1962, and amassed many more over the years. By the time we decided to build custom revolvers, we were acclimated to Rugers. Familiarity played a part in us using Blackhawks, albeit small. Supply and price also steered our decision, but those, too, were secondary. The real driver was their inherent strength and durability.

Realize that, in the late 1980s, interest in single-actions was stagnant. Cowboy Action Shooting had yet begun to revitalize the old thumb buster. If

you wanted to step up to a big-power wheelgun, your options were limited. The Seville, El Dorado, Abilene, and Virginian lines were either defunct or very niche. The FA 83 was more than enough gun, but they ran \$800 to \$1,200; new Blackhawks cost under \$250. Other in-production single-actions, mostly Italian SAAs, just couldn't handle magnum output. Double-action candidates included the tough Dan Wessons and Redhawks, but they were less flexible. By comparison, the Blackhawk was the Mr. Potato Head of the revolver world. Since Ruger unveiled the Single Six, in 1953, it's offered nine different frames, six different backstraps, stainless and blued finishes, multiple hammers and front sights, aluminum and steel accessories, and a dozen-plus chamberings — and that's just within the suite of single-actions! Interchangeability between many of those models expands customization. More importantly, guys like Ross Seyfried and John Linebaugh proved the Blackhawk could safely and routinely take power well north of the venerable .44 Magnum.



Photo by Lee Martin

A .500 Maximum by the Lee Martins.

Our early conversions were pretty tame. Old blackpowder rounds like the .25-20, .38-40, and .44-40 Winchesters were among the first we tackled. By today's standards, their original factory loads were anemic, but, in a strong gun like the Blackhawk, they show some teeth.

Then the power bug bit us and we graduated to five-shot conversions. It started, in 1993, with a 60,000-plus psi .458-caliber wildcat. Built on a stainless Super Blackhawk, that gun took everything we threw at it (and still does to this day). We proceeded to push Blackhawks with other high-intensity cartridges. Some include the .30 Streaker, .375 Atomic, .401

Bobcat, the .475 and .500 Linebaughs, our own .450 Bonecrusher, and even the .500 Maximum. The latter was done on a Super Blackhawk Maximum and, to prove a point, I volume-tested it. That trial entailed no less than 3,000 525-grain cast bullets at more than 1,300 fps. Frame stretch, cylinder play, and busted lockwork must have been a concern, right? Not even close, and the round count continues to climb. Suffice it to say, I lack that type of confidence in Smith's big X.



Photo by Lee Martin

A five-shot .45 Colt by the Martins that started life as an Accusport .45 Colt Bisley.



Photo by Lee Martin

Another view of the five-shot .45 Colt by the Martins, which had started life as an Accusport Distributor Exclusive six-shot .45 Colt.



Photo by Lee Martin

A Martin custom Blackhawk in .401 Bobcat.



Photo by Lee Martin

The .450 Bonecrusher, a Martin wildcat featuring a .500 Linebaugh case necked down to .458-caliber.



Author Photo

The younger Martin shooting the .480 Alaskan off the bench.



Photo by Lee Martin

This brace of wildcat cartridges was designed by Dr. Lee Martin and his son Lee III. They are, from left to right, the .327 Martin Meteor, .375 Atomic, .401 Bobcat 1.29-inch, .401 Bobcat 1.4-inch, .458 Devastator, and the .450 Bonecrusher.



Photo by Lee Martin

Another Martin custom in .218 Bee.



Photo by Lee Martin

This Martin custom Blackhawk was chambered in .38-40. It is another shining example of the Martins' great work.



Author Photo

A .500 JRH Blackhawk with 4½-inch octagon barrel, fluted five-shot cylinder, modified XR3-RED grip frame with custom walnut grips, and finished in hard chrome. A Bowen Rough Country rear sight adorns the revolver.

Jack Huntington, JRH Advanced Gunsmithing

Southern California native Jack Huntington has been building custom Ruger revolvers since the late 1980s, when only a handful of artisans were performing these conversions. A trained tool and die machinist, Jack has a Bachelors degree in Small Arms Engineering and Ballistic Science and has performed warranty work for Smith & Wesson, Colt's, Winchester, Browning, Remington, Charter Arms, and Thompson Center Arms, to name a few. His first-ever five-shot conversion was on a Ruger Bisley, and it was chambered in .500 Linebaugh, in 1988. He has since built hundreds of

custom revolvers from mild to wild on Sturm, Ruger & Company's various offerings.

I caught up with him one afternoon and asked him what he thought of Ruger revolvers. Keep in mind that Jack was one of the first to offer conversions to larger calibers on Freedom Arms Model 83s. Huntington was very specific, listing the following reasons:

- Cost — This one is self-explanatory, but single-action Rugers can be found on the used gun market for a song and a dance, if you look carefully, and they are all viable candidates for custom conversions, regardless the original chambering. They are also attractively priced new, compared to other revolver makes.
- Availability — What else is there we can use, as custom gun builders? These revolvers are plentiful in new and used condition.
- Simplicity — The lockwork of Ruger revolvers is simple, of sound design, easy to work with, and durable.
- Excessive bulk in all of the right areas — The recoil shield is well supported, which is significant, particularly for large-rimmed cartridges such as the .500 Linebaugh. Also, the encapsulation area for barrel threads has significant bulk, which helps it withstand conversions to larger calibers.
- Perfect platform for artistic form — Ruger grip frames lend themselves well to custom modifications, custom barrels, oversized cylinders, and custom finishes such as color case hardening, hard-chroming, bluing, nickel plating, and polishing (stainless steel).
- Quality aftermarket support parts available — Bowen rear sights (these are the best option, in my opinion), Belt Mountain base pins, and Powers Custom grip frames.

- Standard parts — These are available virtually everywhere and from many sources, leaving you with options to procure needed parts with ease.
- Finished product is very reliable and “fine” with finishing details — A best-grade revolver can compete with any high-end factory offering available and often exceed it.
- Almost unlimited caliber spectrum — This includes the large “Maximum” cartridges built on the stretch-framed .357 Maximum revolvers.



Photo by Jason Menefee

A JRH-built mid-frame flat-top with a Bisley grip frame and octagon barrel, chambered in .480 Ruger.



Photo by Vincent Ricarde

A Huntington-built .500 Maximum made for the author, featuring a banded 6½-inch barrel, a Bowen target sight, and a Bisley grip frame with custom walnut grips by Huntington.



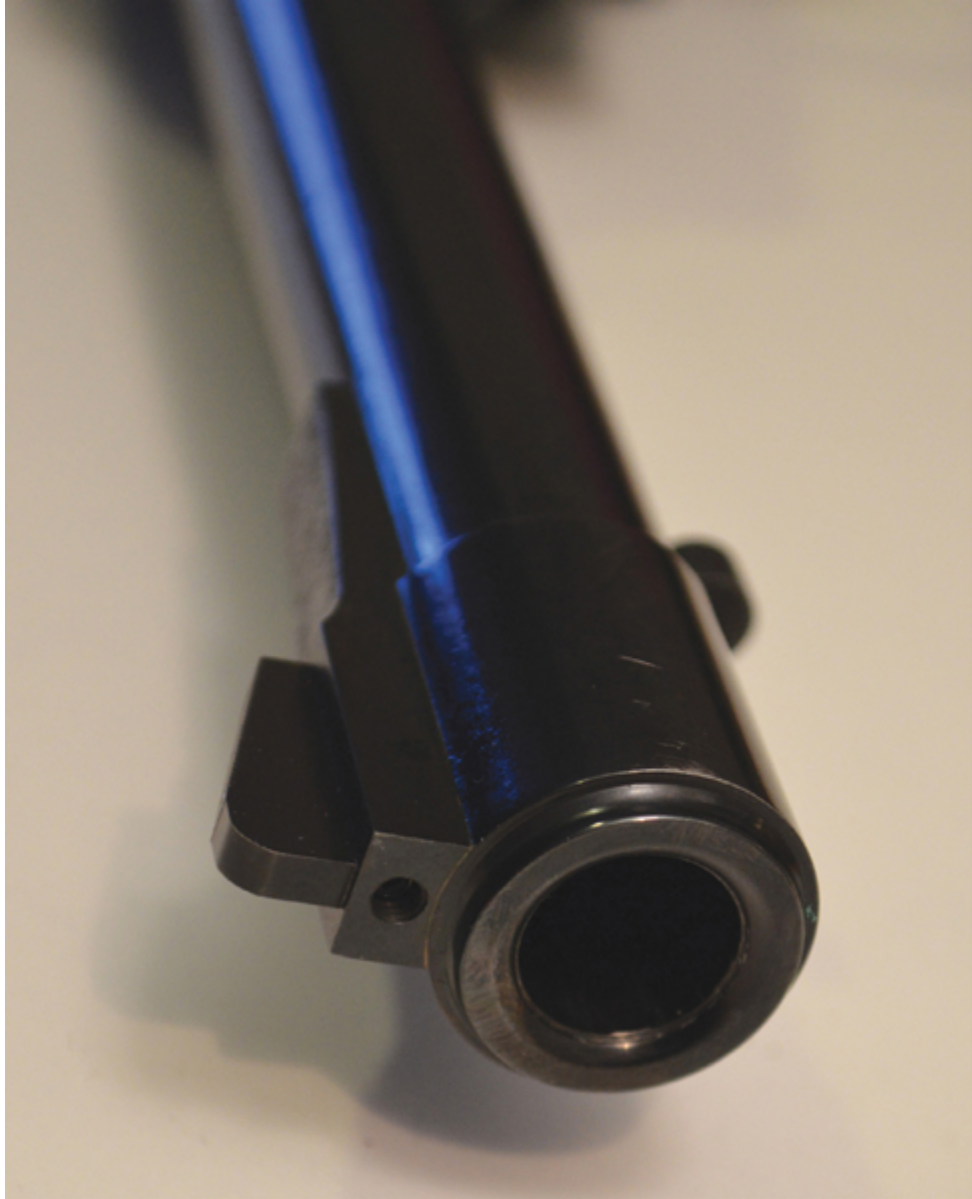
Photo by Steve Mikel

Steve Mikel commissioned JRH Advanced Gunsmithing to refurbish a .500 Maximum that Huntington had long ago built for another client. Steve had it rebuilt the way he wanted, to include a 6½-inch banded barrel, color case hardening by Doug Turnbull, modified Bisley grip frame with custom claro walnut grips, a Bowen rear and front sight, a Belt Mountain No. 5 base pin, free-wheeling pawl, and high-polished bluing.



Author Photo

The crown of the Huntington-built, a .500 JRH Blackhawk with octagon barrel machined by Huntington and with replaceable front sight blades.



Author Photo

A banded barrel with exchangeable front sight on a .500 Maximum by Jack Huntington.



Photo by John Mullins

John Mullins, of New York, is the owner of this stunning Bisley by Huntington. It features a reshaped

Bisley grip adorned with custom walnut grips, a slick, 3¼-pound trigger pull, a five-shot fluted cylinder chambered in .500 JRH, color case hardened trigger, hammer, and frame by Doug Turnbull, a Model 60 S&W rear sight, and a Freedom Arms-style front site block with a threaded set screw that permits blade change. A Belt Mountain base pin rounds out the package.

Jack went on to say that there really isn't another option that is as viable or capable of supporting such a wide variety of powerful cartridges — period. He also said that, in the case of a Freedom Arms revolver utilized for a custom foundation, you are starting with an expensive platform and therefore not increasing value much over the initial cost. A used Ruger revolver, on the other hand, can be purchased cheaply, and then, when the custom work is done, it is worth considerably more.

By far, the most popular fodder for a big-bore five-shot conversion is the Blackhawk with a Bisley grip frame. In Jack's words, "I will build a custom big-bore revolver conversion for a customer with a plow handle grip frame if specified, but most of my customers wanting a large caliber conversion, particularly repeat customers, specify a Bisley grip." Huntington even performs some modifications to the Bisley grip frame that make it more user friendly, such as creating a little more clearance behind the triggerguard, which decreases the possibility of your knuckle making contact with the metal when the gun is fired. Jack also modifies plow handle-style grip frames.



Photo by Greg Johnson

This revolver started life as a .44 Bisley, but is now a JRH modified .45 Colt, with an octagon PacNor barrel and color case hardening by Turnbull.



Photo by Stan George

Another .500 Maximum by JRH Advanced Gunsmithing, this one owned by Stan George.



Photo by Tim Marshal

Tim Marshall, a true big-bore revolver fanatic, called Jack Huntington to get his opinion on having a custom Ruger Maximum chambered in .500 S&W built. Huntington expressed his doubts about that being a good idea, because of the typical pressures to which the .500 S&W is loaded. Tim explained that he had no intentions of loading the .500 S&W to its limit, rather would be keeping it in .500 Maximum territory. That's when Huntington revealed to Tim that he had already built one and was willing to sell it to him. The gun features a 6¼-inch octagon barrel with a machined integral sight base that uses a dovetail front site. Doug Turnbull did the exquisite color case hardening, while the cylinder is a Nitrite Black 17-4 stainless cylinder. Jack modified the Bisley grip frame with fancy walnut grips.



Photo by Steve Mike

Another view of Steve Mikel's gorgeous .500 Maximum by JRH Advanced Gunsmithing.



Photo by Greg Johnson

Dubbed the "Hellboy" by Jack Huntington, this scallop-framed Vaquero is chambered in .500 JRH and features a bird's-head grip frame and stag grips.



By Stephen Webb

Stephen Webb is the third owner of this revolver built by Hamilton Bowen, in 1996, on a short-barreled Super Blackhawk, hence the steel XR3-RED grip frame. The addition of the Bisley hammer was on special request at the time of build and is a very useful addition. It has a steel ejector rod housing, crescent ejector rod, Bowen rear sight, and Bowen locking base pin. The barrel is 4¼ inches long and the gun weighs 43 ounces unloaded. The trigger pull is about three pounds. This gorgeous shooting iron is chambered in .50 Special.

Hamilton S. Bowen, Bowen Classic Arms Corporation

Hamilton Bowen, proprietor of Bowen Custom Arms, is considered one of the great masters in the realm of the custom revolver. A true artist in every respect, Bowen has an eye for aesthetics like very few others. When you handle a custom revolver from Bowen Classic Arms, Hamilton's craftsmanship will be obvious, as every detail has been addressed, smoothed, massaged, improved, and beautified.

In his book *The Custom Revolver*, Hamilton Bowen stated, "New Model frames are tough and substantial enough to handle cartridges much more potent than standard factory fare. Few other revolvers have lockwork that is as robust, simple, and flexible, a feature critical to serious mechanical remodeling."

I spoke with Hamilton about Ruger revolvers used as a foundation for custom gun building. Hamilton stated that the Redhawk is the strongest revolver, as far as Rugers go. They have the largest cylinder and the largest diameter barrel shank. Not only are they strong, they are, as he told me, “tough and hardy, and able to take a lot of abuse. This is their biggest advantage over other makes and models.” He added that Ruger revolvers (both the single- and double-actions), “are stronger, because they are bigger in areas where it counts. Ruger also has the advantage of not only being tough, but well engineered.” Hamilton feels it is not fair to compare the Ruger single-action offerings to the Freedom Arms revolvers, as there is a rather large disparity in the cost. But he emphasized that even the mid-frame Rugers are tougher than the Colt Single Action Army they mimic, as they are made from stronger materials and feature better engineering.



Photo by Stan George

The Bowen Nimrod.



Author Photo

Considered the finest aftermarket adjustable sight, this Target sight by Hamilton Bowen is the industry standard.



Photo by Rob Millette

Named the Predator, this Ruger Super Blackhawk in .44 Magnum was modified by Mag-na-port and features a 4 $\frac{5}{8}$ -inch barrel with ports, a high-visibility sight, a tuned action, and a matte finish.



Photo by Rob Millette

Dubbed the “Stalker” by Mag-na-port, this .44 Magnum Super Blackhawk features an 8 $\frac{3}{8}$ -inch barrel with porting, tuned action, sling swivel mounts, a matte finish, SOB base and scope rings, and a 2x Leupold scope.



Photo by Mike Distin

A five-shot Bisley Nimrod in .45 Colt by Hamilton Bowen, with Turnbull color case hardening, Fishpaw Dall's sheep grips, a replaceable front sight retained by a cross screw, and with a scalloped recoil shield.



Photo by Mike Distin

The “Long Hunter” Bisley by Hamilton Bowen, with five-shot .45 Colt cylinder, Turnbull color case hardening, drift-adjustable rear sight, flat-top, scalloped recoil shield, an express front sight with removable blade, and finished off with Fishpaw Dall’s sheep grips. The rear sight was sourced from USFA.



Photo by Kraig Pendleton

This revolver is serial No. 65 from Linebaugh Custom Sixguns. For some reason, the frame retains the factory Ruger .44 Magnum designation, but the barrel is marked ".500 Linebaugh." Kraig Pendleton installed a Bowen Rough Country rear sight and took it to Jim Stroh to install a steel ERH and his front sight system. Jim also removed the jewellery on the hammer and trigger, sandblasted the grip frame, then sent the barrel, grip frame, hammer, and trigger to Jerry Keefer (of 1911 gunsmith fame), for rebluing. The frame color case hardening was performed by Turnbull and the grips are nicely fitted Sambar stag.

John Linebaugh, Custom Sixguns

John Linebaugh, Missouri native and the progenitor of two of the greatest big-bore revolver cartridges to ever grace the hunting fields, the .475 and .500 Linebaughs, was a cowpoke by day, the occasional trucker, and a gun builder by candlelight. The man is largely and remarkably self-taught.

In the early '80s, John used nothing but Sevilles and El Dorados as foundations for custom sixguns, as he believes Rugers during that period were of varying quality. All of this changed in the mid-'80s, when El Dorados and Sevilles were out of production and inventories were drying

up. John then realized that the Ruger Bisley, released in 1986, was everything he could hope for as a platform, one that offered strength and a grip frame well suited to heavy recoil — and even better suited to the recoil that was on the horizon.

John has been building revolvers full-time since 1985, and I spoke to him one afternoon about his thoughts on the full-size Ruger single-action revolver used as a foundation for a big-bore custom. He told me, “In a nutshell, they’re incredibly tough. I have my own pressure barrels, and it’s amazing what they are capable of handling.” John also stated that he’s built more than 1,000 revolvers through the course his career as a gun builder and so he’s gotten a good feel for Ruger revolvers after so much time. He told me the Old Model three-screw revolvers were a bit on the crude side (“dimensionally incorrect” is how he put it), yet, despite these shortcomings or inconsistencies, they shot well. He feels the newer guns are put together much better.



Photo by John Linebaugh

This Ruger is John's personal revolver and the one he has used the most, over the years, on a pile of game, to include bison. The Ruger in .500 Linebaugh features a 4¾-inch barrel, a Linebaugh-built brass Bisley grip frame with grips by his son Dustin, and a Bowen rear sight.



Photo by John Linebaugh

Belonging to Rob Millette, of Natchez, Mississippi, this John Linebaugh custom is chambered for .38-40 in an oversized six-shot cylinder and features a Bisley grip with ivory Micarta grips by Dustin Linebaugh, 20-degree ramp front sight with Keith gold bars inlaid in it, and a 5½-inch barrel.



Photo by Todd Corder

This Ruger Bisley features a 5½-inch barrel with barrel band. It is chambered in .500 Linebaugh.



Photo by Rob Millette

Todd Corder is the owner of this slick, John Linebaugh-built Single Six Vaquero chambered in .25-20.

With regards to strength, John says that Ruger revolvers are tough, in no uncertain terms. "I have proofed them to the extreme and never hurt one," he said. When asked about any weak links in the design, John stated, "The thread shank is the weak spot, and this is why we can't make the .454 Casull work on the Bisley."

In closing, John Linebaugh declared, "The New Model has fed me for 40 years. It's incredible, the perfect revolver." Well said, Mr. Linebaugh!

Rod Huelter, Dixie Firearms

Originally hailing from sunny California, Rod Huelter, proprietor of Dixie Firearms, of Tillamook, Oregon, moved north at the age of nine. Rod

had a lot to say about Ruger revolvers and some of the other makes he's lain his skilled hands upon.

When I was asked to write this, it was originally about why I choose certain donor guns for my five-shot conversions. The more I thought about this, though, the more I realized I'd have to go further into the world of single-action revolvers.

Let me start with those single-actions best suited and most popular with hunters. These include, Freedom Arms, Magnum Research's BFR, and the Ruger Blackhawk. I've left out the D-Max, Seville, and Century firearms because of their rarity, and Colt's revolvers because they lack the strength to handle true magnum cartridges. There are other brands available in .44 Magnum, but, for now, we'll stick with the three big dogs.

When it comes to off-the-shelf performance, Freedom Arms wins hands down for fit and finish. The tolerances are as tight as you can go and still have a gun function, and their finish is excellent in both field and premium grades. Freedom Arms also offers custom work and will build a gun to your specs within reason.



Photo by Rod Huelter

Another beautiful custom by John Linebaugh, this one owned by Mississippi's own Rob Millette. This Bisley is chambered in .500 Linebaugh and has a 5½-inch barrel, a Bowman ramp front sight and barrel band, and ivory Micarta grips by Dustin Linebaugh.

The strength of the FA frames is slightly more than that of a New Model Ruger, but not enough to matter. If you load hot enough to destroy a Ruger, odds are you will destroy an FA, too. The FA is available in three true big-bore calibers: the .454, which is Freedom Arms' bread and butter; the .475 Linebaugh/.480 Ruger; and the .500 Wyoming Express, which is similar in ballistics to both the .500 JRH and .500 Linebaugh. As a proprietary cartridge, the .500 WE can only be had in the FA model 83.

In my opinion, the shortcomings of the FA are an overly complicated action, a stainless steel-only finish, and an safety inferior to the transfer bar system of the Ruger and BFR. The other limiting factor for many potential buyers is the cost, and one of the most commonly heard complaints is that this cost doesn't include the type of trigger a gun of that cost should come with. As far as breakage, these guns are known for breaking firing pins, although the factory has a new system that allows for a quick change out.

The BFR is the strongest of the guns being talked about here. The frames are heavy-duty; in the guns with a JT prefix to the serial number, the extended version will handle full-pressure .450 Marlin loads. This gun is chambered in a myriad of calibers, but, for this book's purposes, I'll list only the true powerhouse cartridges. In the short frame you have the .454, .480 Ruger/.475 Linebaugh, and .500 JRH. In the extended frame, you have the .460 S&W Magnum, .500 S&W Magnum, .30-30 Winchester, .375 Winchester, .45-70, and .450 Marlin. I'm sure I've missed some, but you can also contact Magnum Research's custom shop (the Precision Center) and it will chamber for other cartridges. Although the fit and finish of this gun is not quite up to that of Freedom Arms, it is still an excellent gun, and most are very accurate right out of the box. These guns have very similar lockwork to that of the Rugers and, in fact, some parts are interchangeable.



Photo by Rod Huelter

This revolver, from Dixie Firearms, is a Blackhawk in .500 Linebaugh, with an eight-inch barrel. The camouflage finish is Cerakote, and the gun has Hogue ebony grips and it is topped with a Leupold 2x scope.

The BFR is a workhorse, and though the tolerances aren't what they could be, it is still an excellent revolver and probably the best deal for the money on the market. My biggest complaint about the BFR is the grip frame. If you find you can't handle it and need it improved, then, for a reasonable cash outlay, Jack Huntington can set you up with his own customized grip frame design. The only other issues I have are that, again, this gun is only available in stainless steel and the action is not what it should be, having excessive trigger pull weight and creep.

The Ruger Blackhawk and Super Blackhawk are the good old standbys. These guns are workhorses priced for the working man. In this platform, though, you can only get them in .44 Magnum or .45 Colt. The frames are strong and the guns are available in either stainless steel or the chrome-

moly steel that is the blued version; the stainless is slightly stronger, but not enough to be an issue. The Rugers are anywhere from poor to adequate to excellent in accuracy out of the box. Another positive point for the Ruger is the availability of the Bisley grip, which is excellent at helping tame the heavy hitters, although Jack Huntington can modify the Ruger plow handles, just as he does the BFR grip frames.

My negatives start with the lack of uniformity between guns. The tolerances can vary from gun to gun, and I've even seen twisted frames and barrels with threads galled from the factory. The finish machining isn't what it could be and the actions are normally very poor from the factory. I've also run into things such as cylinder chambers bored offline, and I feel the aluminum grip frames on the standard Blackhawks give the guns a cheap feel.

It bears mentioning that of these revolvers, the FAs are in the \$2,000-plus range, BFRs cost around \$1,000, and Rugers run around \$500 to \$600 new. That's a lot of difference in the impact to your wallet.

When we start talking about converting a factory six-shooter to a five-shot big-bore, the picture I drew before starts to change. Most gunsmiths, including me, who build these guns use the Ruger frames as donors, and the reasons are simple — availability and cost.

The FA is a poor choice for builds; I know of some that have been done, but the cost and the over-engineered action put it at the bottom of my list. If you're wondering what I mean about "over-engineered," just look at a breakdown of a Freedom Arms and then of a Ruger or BFR. I've been in the mechanical fields all my life, including dealing with auto and heavy truck, aircraft, and industrial electric motors and equipment, and I even served a stint as a Machinist Mate on board a nuclear submarine. The fact is, when it comes to mechanical objects, less is more. In other words, the more

moving parts you have, the better chance of a parts failure and the more friction points there are. If you handle an FA, it will feel solid and the lockup is excellent, but the action is almost “clunky.”

The BFR is not a bad way to go, but, again, initial cost is higher and, as I stated before, you’re dealing with a stainless-only gun. (I should point out that any stainless gun can be changed to various colors via a lacquer or ceramic-based coating.)

A feature of both the Ruger and the BFR that sets them ahead is the design of their actions. They can be made to be glass smooth, without creep and with a very light trigger pull.

A common misnomer about the custom Rugers is that they can’t match up to the FA in tolerances. I’m here to tell you that’s a bunch of B.S. From a mechanical point of view, the Ruger and BFR can be tuned far smoother than the FA and the lockup and tolerances just as tight, but the trick is to find a gunsmith that takes that kind of pride in his work. There are gunsmiths out there who build “custom“ Rugers, but they leave those guns at their factory tolerances, throw in some springs, and call it an action job. Basically, all they do is open up the cylinder window, throw in a five-shot cylinder (without line boring), and put a new barrel on it.



Author Photo

This Dixie Firearms-built Ruger Vaquero, belonging to Ed Folmar, has been fitted with Bisley parts and converted to .475 Linebaugh with a five-shot cylinder. The frame and grip frame have been color case hardened and the barrel was dovetailed for a rifle-type ivory bead front sight.

Aside from these points, the other thing the customs have over the factory guns above is an almost limitless number of cartridges, from the .480 Ruger, .50 Bowen, .500 Special, and .454 Casull to the massive .500 Linebaugh and .500 JRH in a standard frame. In the stretched frame, there are wildcats in .410, .429, .451, and .458 up to the monstrous .475 and .500 Maximums, and even the mighty .500 S&W Magnum. You can also choose to have these guns built on a blued frame, giving them a classic look, and there are tons of options from sights to two-tone finishes and many other modifications.

You will still find the odd D-Max, Seville, and Century big-bores running around, but they are rare. The only other option is to either make your frames yourself or contract out, but unless you are a high-volume shop, this is cost prohibitive. If I had my way, I'd have a frame built to my own specs

with the strength of a modern Ruger or BFR, but in the design of the three-screw Ruger or Colt 1873. The reasons for this are that the actions are even simpler on those than is the current Ruger design, and they can be tuned infinitely to meet anyone's demands.

The .500 Linebaugh

Attention was first drawn to the .500 Linebaugh, with the publication of an article by Ross Seyfried, in the August 1986 issue of *Guns & Ammo* magazine. The article was appropriately titled “The .500 Magnum — The Outer Limits of Handgun Power.” Though not offered in a production revolver, the .500 Linebaugh still boasts a strong following — enough that both Grizzly Cartridge and Buffalo Bore offer a number of production loads for this first .50-plus-caliber handgun cartridge. Brass is reportedly available from Starline and Hornady.

Loaded to potential, the .500 Linebaugh is a true big-game hammer. Based on the .348 Winchester case and cut down to a nominal 1.4 inches, the .500 Linebaugh features a .511-bore diameter. Maximum pressure should be kept in the 33,000 to 36,000 psi range, though it will safely go higher. The beauty of the .500 Linebaugh is that it doesn't *need* to be pushed hard to work well on large game (with the caveat, of course, that it is loaded correctly with a good bullet). In fact, through testing it's been found that, with cast, wide-meplat bullets in the 500-grain range, its 1,100 fps is more than adequate for even the largest ungulates. I successfully took a nearly 800-pound moose with a .500 Linebaugh, and the round did not disappoint in how it did its job.

The .500 Linebaugh, in my experience, offers a heavier push than its smaller brethren, the .475 Linebaugh. I shoot 500- and 525-grain bullets from mine almost exclusively now, as these loads have proven deadly and accurate. That said, my revolver weighs just under three pounds and also does a good job beating up the shooter. While muzzle jump is less than with many of the big-bore revolvers I have shot, the recoil is heavy and jarring. The cumulative affect can be debilitating.

SPECIFICATIONS:	
Bullet Diameter:	.511-inch
Case Length:	1.4 inches
Overall Length:	1.8 inches
Maximum Pressure:	40,000 psi



Author Photo

The .500 Linebaugh is a cartridge that enjoys an enthusiastic following, despite the fact that no production revolvers are chambered in the big-game cartridge. Both Buffalo Bore and Grizzly Cartridge offer a variety of loads for the .500 Linebaugh. The beefy round is seen here sandwiching a .44 Magnum for comparison.

The .475 Linebaugh

This cartridge is a personal favorite of mine. The .475 Linebaugh was unleashed on the handgun world, in 1988, by gun builder John Linebaugh, whose surname appropriately graces the cartridge. The original parent case of the then-wildcat was the .45-70, which was cut down to 1.4 inches and has a .476-caliber bullet. This cartridge is truly serious and has taken the largest and most dangerous game that Africa and the rest of the world has to offer.

In its first incarnation, it was designed to push a 400- to 420-grain bullet to speeds up to 1,400 fps. The recoil is stout, by anyone's standards. This is not a cartridge for the uninitiated, as it kills on both ends.

Ross Seyfried first wrote about the .475 Linebaugh in the May 1988 issue of *Guns & Ammo* magazine. The article was appropriately dubbed, ".475 Monster Magnum ... The Outer Limit Handgun." If that article hadn't gotten your blood pumping, he followed it up with an essay entitled ".475 Revolver Down Under," in the December 1989 issue of *Guns & Ammo*. In that second article, Seyfried succinctly stated, "The .475 revolver cartridge was designed to be the ultimate big-game round for use in handguns. It represents a monumental step up from the .44s and a considerable increase in horsepower over any of the .45-caliber cartridges. This combination of long, heavy bullets at moderately high velocities makes even the highly touted .454 Casull seem small and ineffective." Ross then proceeded to knock down a modicum of big game in Australia, with his John Linebaugh-built Ruger Bisley .475, including feral goats, pigs, donkeys, wild cattle, and an Indian water buffalo. Ross' first shot on the water buffalo resulted in two broken front shoulders. The effectiveness of the .475 Linebaugh on big game cannot be argued.

Brass is readily available for the handloader from two sources, Hornady and Starline. Two production revolvers are offered in this fantastic caliber at the time this book goes to print, those being the Freedom Arms Model 83 and the Magnum Research BFR.

This caliber generates undeniably heavy recoil. The .475 Linebaugh, loaded to potential — that is, a 420 grain bullet pushing over 1,300 fps — will not let you soon forget that you are packing serious heat. The recoil isn't quite the quick jab the .454 Casull exhibits, but more of a heavy push. It can get away from you, so you must concentrate when shooting the .475.



Author Photo

The .475 Linebaugh is a serious big-game cartridge for the serious big-game hunter. The .475 enjoys support by two revolver manufacturers, Freedom Arms, and Magnum Research with its BFR. Hornady, Grizzly Cartridge, and Buffalo Bore all load for this chambering. A .44 Magnum (far right) is displayed for comparison.

SPECIFICATIONS:	
Bullet Diameter:	.476-inch
Case Length:	1.384 inches
Overall Length:	1.75 inches
Maximum Pressure:	50,038 psi



Photo by Steve Mikel

Owned by Bill Mikel, this revolver was built by Alan Harton, of Single Action Service, and remains a .357 Magnum. Harton flat-topped the frame and installed a Micro rear sight and one of his own custom front sights. The steel grip frame was fitted and lengthened, and Harton made the grips with the English walnut Mikel supplied. The cylinder received blackpowder chamfering and wider, first generation Colt-style cylinder flutes. A Clements Old Model Bisley hammer was added, as was a steel ejector rod housing, Bull's-eye ejector rod, and a Belt Mountain No. 5 base pin. Turnbull handled the stunning color case hardening and carbona bluing.

Alan Harton, Single-Action Service

Located in Houston, Texas, Single Action Service specializes in, you guessed it, single-action revolvers. Many of Alan Harton's clientele are cowboy action shooters attempting to get a leg up on their competition with some fine tuning. Alan Harton has these tasks down to a science.

I spoke to the ever affable Harton about Ruger revolvers, and the first statement he made was about the strength of the platforms.

"Ruger's internal parts are heat-treated to a very hard level. The entire revolver is made from heat-treated steel, and the tensile strength is high."

Harton is commissioned to work on many Italian-made Colt Single Action Army replicas and reports that the internal parts in these otherwise finely made revolvers aren't heat-treated and are, thus, buttery soft. Unlike Ruger's full-sized revolvers, the Italian replicas are not up to the task of performing as the platform for a large-caliber conversion.

Not only are the Ruger revolvers a platform of strength, there are many aftermarket parts available. Harton cited companies such as Power Custom, Belt Mountain, and others that have kept the custom revolver realm vibrant. Aftermarket manufacturers have seen the needs and jumped to fill them with quality parts.



Photo by Steve Mike

The flip side of Bill Mikel's Harton-built beauty.



Photo by Steve Mikel

This cylinder was treated to blackpowder chamfer and wider, first-generation Colt-style cylinder flutes.



Photo by Greg Wagner

An Alan Harton-built Old Model stainless steel Single Six in .41 Special with a 4 $\frac{5}{8}$ -inch barrel, steel Single Six “short” grip frame, Turnbull color case hardening, Harton-built custom Bisley hammer, and desert bighorn sheep grips.



Photo by Alan Harton

Created for Henry Garza, this Single Six Vaquero is chambered in .38 Special and was built by the talented hands of Alan Harton, of Single Action Service.



Photo by Stan George

A Gary Reeder .500 Linebaugh, this one an “Ultimate Backup” model owned by Stan George.



Photo by Stan George

This "African Hunter" by Gary Reeder is chambered in .500 Linebaugh and is owned by Stan George.



Photo by Jared Schmidt

This 5½-inch .327 Bisley Single Six was built by John Gallagher.



Photo by Stan George

Stan George commissioned John Gallagher to build this Blackhawk in .500 Linebaugh with one of his five-inch octagon barrels, Micarta grips, and a Bowen rear sight.



Photo by Thomas Kelly

This revolver was built by a machinist friend of Thomas Kelly, on a 50th Anniversary .357. It is a six-shot, and the cylinder came from a New Vaquero in .45 Colt. The octagon barrel is 5½ inches, and the case hardening and nitre blue accents are by Turnbull. The smooth stag grips are by Patrick Grasshorn.



Photo by Boge Quinn

This revolver started life as a 5½-inch Ruger Bisley Vaquero in .45 Colt. Dustin Linebaugh rebarreled it with a four-inch octagon barrel, slicked-up the action, installed a custom front sight with a vertical gold bar, then his neat little rear sight insert. He scalloped the loading gate, round-butt the grip frame, and beautifully fit a set of ivory Micarta stocks. Owner Boge Quinn suffered a heart attack while Dustin was working on the Ruger, and knowing this, Dustin's father John wanted to have a hand in it, so he made the five-shot .500 Linebaugh cylinder. To say this Vaquero is special to Boge Quinn would be an understatement of epic proportions.



Photo by Boge Quinn

This Dustin Linebaugh Vaquero features a four-inch octagon barrel.



Photo by Boge Quinn

This Dustin Linebaugh-built Vaquero features a five-shot cylinder built by Dustin's father, John.

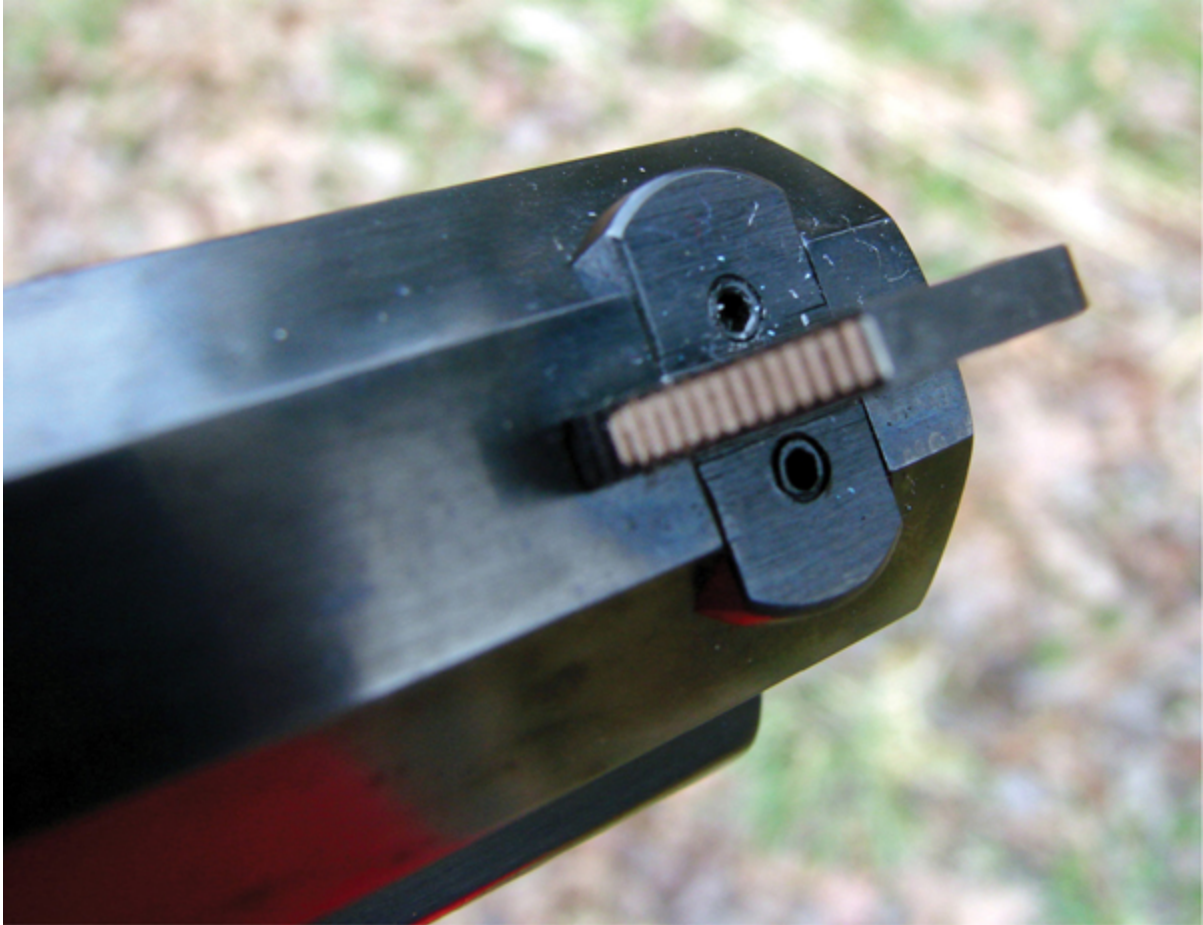


Photo by Boge Quinn

A beautiful custom front sight by Dustin Linebaugh.

My Own Ruger Customs

I have had a love affair with Ruger revolvers for as far back as I can remember. Being a hot-rodder at heart, I have trouble leaving well enough alone and have no trouble wrapping my head around the concept of modifying something to make it better, faster, stronger, or simply more “my own.” Combine those attributes, and the result is a slew of custom revolvers, many of which are unconventional.

Here you’ll see the photos of a few of my own custom Ruger revolvers, starting with a pair of five-shot Super Redhawks, one in

.475 Linebaugh, the other in .500 Linebaugh. The .475 started life as a .480 Ruger I purchased new in 2001, the other, a .454 Casull I bought a couple years later. I had just returned from my latest overseas job, when I spotted the Target Gray .480 Super Redhawk in the display case of my local gun shop in Southern California, The Lock, Stock 'n' Barrel. I had to have it, purchasing it right then and there. I was intrigued with the all-business look of the Target Gray behemoth, and I liked the unusual finish it was sporting. While it kicked a bit more than the .44 Magnums I was accustomed to shooting, I found the .480 Super Redhawk to be both controllable and a pleasure to shoot.



Photo by Vincent Ricarde

A pair of Huntington Super Redhawks in .475 and .500 Linebaugh.

At the earliest opportunity, I flew to Florida with my .480 SRH in tow, to try it out on the central Florida hog population. That weekend I bagged two, one tipping the scales at 300 pounds. I was impressed with the .480's effectiveness on game, as well as its accuracy.

While it served me well in stock form, I was convinced I needed and wanted more, hence the conversion to the bigger .475 Linebaugh cartridge. Again, off I went overseas, but I made arrangements with JRH Advanced Gunsmithing to take on the task of making my .480 SRH into an even meaner revolver (meaner on the shooter's hand, and meaner on the wallet). It still possesses the 7½-inch barrel it left the factory with, but was fitted with a five-shot stainless steel cylinder by Jack Huntington. It was a simple conversion, and the end result was accurate and very hard hitting (on both ends). That revolver has been responsible for taking a large number of big-game animals.



Photo by Vincent Ricarde

An SRH in .475 Linebaugh with a 7½-inch barrel topped with an Ultradot 30. The work was done by Huntington.



Author Photo

An SRH in .500 Linebaugh with a five-inch fluted barrel, by JRH.



Author Photo

A .454 Super Redhawk cylinder retrofitted to .45 Colt Redhawk with a four-inch barrel, by Jack Huntington.

The .500 Linebaugh Super Redhawk, replete with a fluted five-inch barrel, was intended to perform double duty as both a primary hunting weapon and a back-up sidearm. This one started life as a .454 Casull and also served me well over the years, but eventually became the foundation of another big-bore project.

The recoil of this revolver is quite heavy with my chosen loads of 500-grain hardcast bullets (from Cast Performance), loaded to 1,200 fps. Like my .475 Linebaugh SRH, this one is fitted with Hogue's excellent Tamer grips, which I feel are a necessity with recoil levels this high. This revolver tips the scales at just under three pounds, making it a pleasure to carry — and a brute to shoot. Once I spent

time experimenting with an Ultradot 30 red dot sight on it and discovered just how accurate it was, it quickly became a primary (and a favorite) hunting revolver, accounting for a number of large game animals, to include an 800-pound Maine cow moose and a North Carolina black bear.



Photo by Vincent Ricarde

A .500 Maximum by JRH advanced gunsmithing.

Another Ruger double-action revolver that spends a lot of time on my hip as a back-up weapon, one inextricably linked to my .500 Linebaugh SRH, is this Ruger Redhawk. How is it linked? The six-shot .454 cylinder that was removed from the Super Redhawk and grew up to be a .500 Linebaugh, before being retrofitted to a four-inch .45 Colt Redhawk by Jack Huntington. Aside from the cylinder and action tuning, the revolver remains stock. Lively with full-house

.454 loads, this revolver has proven accurate and reliable. It is fed a steady diet of heavy .45 Colt loads, which are markedly more pleasant to shoot than .454 loads. This revolver is rugged, reliable, and effective.

This next revolver is one of my all-time favorites. I bought an absolutely pristine .357 Maximum from an online auction sight and promptly sacrificed it to the big-bore gods. (Is nothing sacred?) Jack Huntington was again given the nod to perform his magic on this best-quality .500 Maximum. Featuring a Huntington-modified Bisley grip frame and beautiful, custom English walnut grips, the five-shot .500 Maximum has a 6½-inch banded barrel with a 1:18 twist. It also has a free-wheeling pawl, a Bowen target rear sight, and a Belt Mountain No. 5 base pin. Recoil with my chosen load — 525-grain Cast Performance bullets over a stiff charge of 1680 — is brisk, but it is deadly accurate and very effective on game. It has so far accounted for one large black bear and one wild hog (as of this book's publication).

This short-barreled Bisley was built by Jack Huntington, using a stock-sized five-shot cylinder chambered in .480 Ruger. The frame window has not been altered. A four-inch barrel rounds out the slick little, easily packed revolver. Recoil is brisk with some of my handloads, but it carries so well, it just doesn't seem to matter. This is a revolver configuration that I (and I suspect many others), wish Sturm, Ruger & Company would produce for the general public. It would undoubtedly prove exceedingly popular. If you don't believe me, log on to any Internet revolver website and bring up Blackhawk and .480 Ruger in the same sentence, step back, and watch the fireworks.



Photo by Jason Menefee

A five-shot .480 Ruger on a Bisley Blackhawk with four-inch barrel, by Jack Huntington.



Photo by Lee Martin

This is another view of the .480 Bisley.

Yet another Huntington creation is this Blackhawk chambered in Jack Huntington's own round, the .500 JRH, a .50-caliber round with a 1.4-inch case length. A 4½-inch octagon barrel was added, as was a fluted five-shot cylinder, a Bowen Rough Country rear sight, and Huntington's signature modified plow handle grip frame (in this case an XR3-RED), is finished with stunning custom English walnut grips also from Huntington. The entire revolver was then hard-chromed. I am growing quite fond of this finish, considering its resistance to abrasion and the elements. This revolver has taken a number of North Carolina whitetail in the hands of my good friend and hunting partner Larry Welch. While it doesn't belong to me, I have had the pleasure of using it for extended periods of time and can report it is very accurate and effective on game — oh, and it looks great!



Photo by Jason Menefee

Another view of a Huntington-built .500 JRH Blackhawk with octagon barrel, extended XR-3 RED grip frame, custom walnut grips, and Bowen Rough Country rear sight, the gun finished in hard chrome.

The Maximum = Maximum Overdrive

The Ruger .357 Maximum, designed for use in metallic silhouette competition, left an indelible mark on the custom revolver field. Released to the public, in 1982, and only produced for a bit more than a year, the .357 Maximum was a stretched-frame Blackhawk fitted with a Super Blackhawk grip frame to accommodate the longer (1.6-inch case) .357 Maximum cartridge as designed by Bill Ruger,

Jr. There was a line of related cartridges, to include the .414, .375, and .445 SuperMags, which were chambered in some other manufacturers' revolvers, mainly Dan Wesson and United Sporting Arms, and which also featured a 1.6-inch case length as designed by Elgin Gates. They were designed as a step up in performance from their parent cartridges, providing more steel silhouette knockdown power.

There were three more, the .458, .475, and .500 Maximums, that were created for hunting really large game. Those offer a considerable step up in velocity potential — and an increase in recoil that is directly proportional. The .458 Maximum was actually based on a cut-down (to 1.6 inches) .458 Winchester Magnum case (meaning it head spaces on the belt). This one was the least popular of these three “artillery” rounds, so I will focus on its two bigger brothers.

Also known as the “Linebaugh Longs,” as they are merely longer-cased .475 and .500 Linebaughs, the only suitable platform for these cartridges is the Ruger .357 Maximum. (I guess one could argue that you could base your conversion on a Dan Wesson or U.S. Sporting Arms SuperMag revolver, but this is a Ruger book!) Only produced for a bit more than a year, there is a finite number of these revolvers in circulation and they typically command a premium as such. However, they can still be had and they still make for a great custom build. On a quick side note, the .475 Linebaugh was originally based on a cut-down .45-70 case, the .500 Linebaugh on a shortened .348 Winchester case. Both cartridges have dedicated, properly headstamped brass commercially available.

My own introduction to the .475 and .500 Maximums began with an article published in *Guns & Ammo* magazine, in 1991, penned by none other than the inimitable Ross Seyfried. These rounds are products of “More’s Law”: if some is good, more is better. Both cartridges are $\frac{2}{10}$ -inch longer than their parent cases, enabling them to achieve up to 200 fps more velocity with the same weight bullets and at similar pressures.



Author Photo

The .357 Maximum (left) next to the .475 and .500 Maximums.

Neither cartridge really caught on, the .475 Maximum less so than the .500 Maximum. Generally speaking, the net performance gains never really outweighed the additional discomfort and punishment these two cartridges can dish out, particularly in such a light platform. The .500, in particular, when loaded to its maximum capacity (the 50,000 psi range, and note these are to be considered

proof-type loads), can best be described as being somewhere from very unpleasant to life altering. The .500 Maximum is capable of throwing a 525-grain bullet at a blistering 1,500 fps. Believe me, as a package weighing less than 3½-pounds, this revolver is truly a handful and difficult to master.

As mentioned before, I acquired my Ruger .357 Maximum on an online auction site. It was in pristine condition and undoubtedly shot very little. It wore a 7½-inch barrel, and it came in the original box. The walnut grips were missing and rubber grips had been fitted in their stead, but it didn't really matter, as my Maximum was to receive a Bisley grip frame. The end result can be seen in these pages, but the photos don't entirely do the revolver justice. Jack Huntington did a beautiful job building this best-grade revolver. It shoots as well as it looks, and believe me, it looks very good!

I load my .500 Maximum right about the 35,000 psi level, which gets me 1,350 fps from a 525-grain Cast Performance WFN hardcast bullet. The recoil impulse is deceptive. When you think it is finished recoiling, it recoils some more, with a very long impulse. At these levels, the shooter is not suffering *too* much abuse, and the gun will live at these pressures for a dozen lifetimes. While it can digest the 50,000 psi loads, they will eventually take their toll on the revolver (and, potentially, the shooter).



Author Photo

The .475 Linebaugh (left) next to the .475 Maximum



Author Photo

The .500 Linebaugh (left) next to the .500 Maximum



Author Photo

This Ruger .357 Maximum belonging to the author was later converted by Jack Huntington to be a .500 Maximum.



Photo by Vincent Ricarde

A .500 Maximum by Jack Huntington.



Author Photo

Larry Welch shooting the author's Huntington-built .500 Maximum. Its 525-grain bullets at 1,350 fps will get your attention!

Is there really a need the Maximums fulfill? I would argue there really isn't. Still, I don't justify my projects by assigning some arbitrary "need" to them. Rationalization is an excuse to act or not to act on an impulse. So, if you want one, this is the only necessary justification, as far as I'm concerned. I have used my .500 Maximum on game and report that it does what a .50-caliber, 500-plus-grain round should do to game. Having said that, running the same bullet a couple hundred feet per second slower doesn't seem to diminish its terminal effectiveness on game, yet it renders the revolver much easier to shoot and shoot well, particularly if rapid follow-up shots are required.

As a side note, the .500 Maximum requires a dedicated practice regimen to truly master, and I do mean a *frequent* regimen, as the recoil takes some getting used to. If you only pick it up and shoot it every once in a while, you need to retrain and re-familiarize yourself to the revolver every outing. Granted, I feel that all heavy recoiling revolvers you hunt with need to be shot frequently, to maintain a certain level of competence and ability, this one just requires that much more. It is an exercise in excess, plain and simple.

I wouldn't trade my Maximum for any other revolver, as the look, balance, fit and finish, accuracy, etc., are top shelf. However, if hunting is on the list of regular activities, get yourself a smaller Blackhawk-based big-bore custom. It will be easier to master and stay sharp with. Trust me, you won't be missing much.

Double-Action Big-Bore Conversions

Though not quite as popular as single-action Rugers for custom big-bore conversions, the Ruger Redhawk and Super Redhawk lend themselves nicely to accommodating some of the most powerful cartridges on the planet, but limited to the 1.4-inch cases as a maximum. A number of custom gun builders, including Gary Reeder, Hamilton Bowen, and Jack Huntington, routinely create fire-breathing big-bore revolvers on Ruger's popular Redhawk and Super Redhawk platforms.

As we have seen, a lot of extra insurance was built into the Redhawk and Super Redhawk designs, particularly useful for the practice of converting stock Redhawks in .44 Magnum to .454 Casull by rechambering the stock cylinder. This speaks volumes, as a more intense revolver round doesn't exist. The sum of their parts easily exceeds the strength of Ruger's single-action offerings, but the fact that the cylinder sits on a moving crane negates

some of that advantage. This shouldn't present any issues, though, as these two big double-actions by Ruger have more than enough strength to safely handle the abuse imparted by some very powerful rounds.



Author Photo



Photo by Perry Schneider

Modified by owner Perry Schneider, this Redhawk started life as a .45 Colt with a 4.2-inch barrel.

Perry added the Nill Griffe grips, then removed "Read Instructions Manual" from one side of the barrel and ".45 Colt" from the other side. The biggest change came with the addition of a .454 Casull cylinder out of a Super Redhawk.



Author Photo

Jack Huntington fitted the author's .45 Colt Redhawk with the cylinder out of an SRH in .454 Casull.
Aside from the trigger tuning, all else remains stock.



Photo by Stan George

Stan George is the owner of this Hamilton Bowen-built Super Redhawk in .500 Linebaugh.

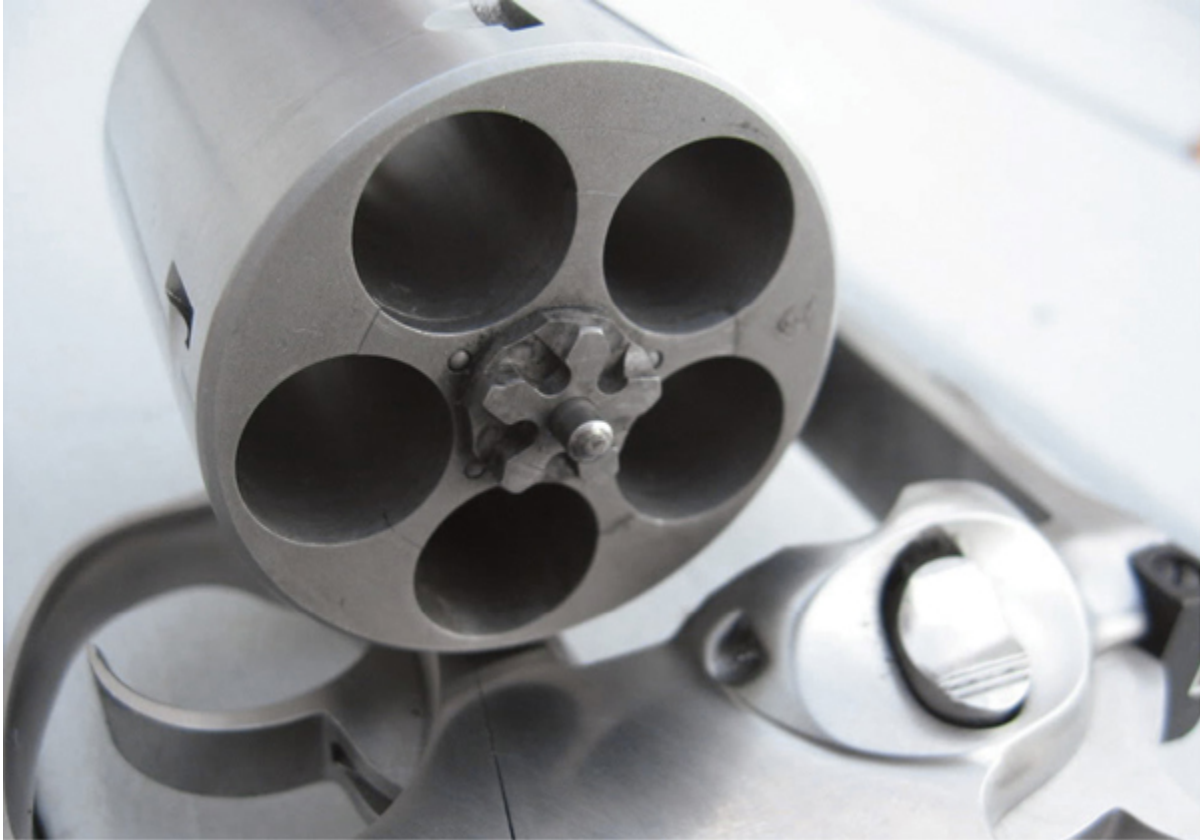


Photo by Stan George

Stan George's Super Redhawk by Hamilton Bowen features this five-shot cylinder in the powerful .500 Linebaugh.

I admit to a particular attraction to big-bore Ruger double-action revolvers. There is something very business-like about their lines, and I like the heft in my hands, unlike Smith & Wesson's Model 29, which imparts an almost fragile feeling. This is not meant as a disparaging remark about Smith & Wesson's fine offerings, but the contrast is stark. Felt recoil from identical loads will also shine a light on this contrast. The Rugers just feel stronger.

I shot literally thousands of full-bore .475 Linebaugh rounds — 420-grain bullets at a full 1,350 fps — through my Huntington-converted Super Redhawk, with nary a whimper from my revolver. It is still as tight as the day it was assembled, despite even more full-tilt fodder being passed

through its barrel by its new owner. I see even more abuse in its future, but, like a loyal dog, it will continue to come back for more.

While not as aesthetically pleasing as a single-action revolver (and I'll concede that this type of thing is rather subjective), a fine and functional custom can be built on this versatile platform. Despite my single-action obsession, I maintain a number of big-bore double-actions in my collection, and they make frequent forays into the field. I still feel that, for back-up duty, the double-action offers a slight edge over its single-action counterpart, as the DA is simply easier to fire rapidly with one hand, by virtue of it not requiring manual cocking. I sincerely hope that none of us have the occasion to test this theory, but I stand by it.



Photo by Lee Martin

This Super Redhawk chambered in .500 Linebaugh was built by JRH Advanced Gunsmithing. The exceptionally accurate revolver features a fluted five-inch barrel.



Author Photo

This SRH in .454 Casull, owned by Drew Koval, was customized by Mag-na-port and features a ported five-inch barrel, jeweled trigger and hammer, and a very slick action.



Author Photo

Another Super Redhawk in .454 Casull customized by Mag-na-port and owned by Drew Koval, featuring a stock-length barrel outfitted with a muzzle brake, plus a jeweled trigger and hammer and an action job.



Photo by Mike Distin

Believe it or not, this is not a Smith & Wesson M&P, rather it's a Redhawk conversion by Hamilton Bowen. This one has a dovetail front sight, lanyard ring, six-shot .45 Colt conversion with barrel rebore, and a trigger job with overtravel stop. Mike Distin added Eagle Ultraivory grips to dress it up. This revolver is nothing short of stunning.



Photo by Hamilton Bowen

From the beginning, Hamilton Bowen liked Ruger's Redhawk platform for its barrel shank diameter. He still offers big-bore Redhawk conversions, like this one in .500 Linebaugh.

CHAPTER EIGHT

RUGERS ON THE HUNT





Author Photo

Some choose the more difficult path to hunting success. While the scoped rifle is the popular choice, the big-bore revolver is more difficult to master, yet not less effective.

Finally, when all is said and done, we move to the activity I most enjoy and appreciate, hunting with a handgun — actually, hunting with a *Ruger* handgun. I have assembled a number of hunting photos featuring Ruger revolvers and anecdotes about Ruger revolvers on the hunt.

There are a number of requirements I find necessary for a proper hunting revolver. First and foremost, it must possess acceptable accuracy. How acceptable? Obviously, you must be able to hit what you aim at or there really is no sense in even attempting this endeavor. That said, everyone must know their limitations, if they are to embark on a successful hunt. Your chosen firearm and load combination must possess the kind of accuracy that can be relied upon, when you have an animal lined up in your sights. The other side of the equation is the shooter's ability to place his/her shots accurately. How far you can shoot with reasonable accuracy will dictate how far out you can shoot your chosen game. I would suggest

establishing your loads off the bench, and once satisfied with the accuracy potential of that load, it is time to practice, practice, practice, and practice some more. This practice should be limited to field positions and nothing else, but that is a conversation for another segment.

Once accuracy is established, we need to look at reliability. Reliability imparts confidence. Confidence goes a long way toward helping shape the successful and successfully consistent hunter. You have the responsibility of making absolutely sure your gun/ammo combination will do the same thing every time the trigger is tripped. This also includes reliable ignition in inclement weather conditions, and ammunition that won't pull crimp should also be factored into the reliability equation. If you are hunting in below-zero temperatures, will your ammunition reliably ignite when the hammer falls? This is something you need to find out beforehand. Having an animal in your sights is not the time to figure out if everything is working correctly.



Author Photo

While accuracy is of absolute importance on the hunt, the author has never been much of a target group shooter. Instead, he emphasizes making the first shot the absolute most important factor of his practice routine.

You need to thoroughly vet your equipment. To me, this is nonnegotiable. Besides, why spoil your time afield? Like many, time hunting is more infrequent than anyone really wants it to be, so why spoil the moment and the memories by finding out something is wrong with your combination when you are in the bush and can't really do anything about it? This is particularly poignant when you are on the hunt of a lifetime and have spent a hefty amount of money on it. Save yourself the headache, the heartache, and the trophy fees.

Let's talk about practice some more. You will do yourself no amount of good by practicing from the bench. My own practice regimen includes a heavy dose of offhand shooting. You're going to ask, "Isn't shooting offhand more difficult?" Precisely, that is why I do it. Once your offhand game is good, the rest is relatively easy.

While I practice a lot offhand, I still prefer to have a gun rest. I think every hunter should make every reasonable effort to find a rest before taking a shot at an animal; we owe our game a clean kill, I think we can all agree. A rest can consist of a branch, a log, a tree stump, a large rock, the shooting rail of a treestand, or your backpack. Shooting sticks are another very viable option and they're something I use regularly when circumstances allow. I tend to rest the frame of the revolver in the crux to stabilize it, while still maintaining a firm grip to control muzzle flip and accuracy.

There are a number of shooting positions that are expedient and stable. Sitting is one of the most stable for me and is a position I particularly like. I prefer having some sort of rest for my back, which increases stability, but this isn't absolutely necessary. Kneeling is also a very good position and one that can be gotten into quickly. While not as stable as a sitting position, in which both arms are stabilized, the kneeling position nevertheless is a good one. Keep in mind that your lead elbow should not be resting directly on your knee.

Shooting your Ruger revolver well requires sights that you cannot only quickly acquire, but ones that you can shoot with well. This obviously largely depends on the hunter's vision capabilities. I like open iron sights for their convenience. They slip into ordinary holsters and are less prone to damage. In low-light circumstances, I prefer red dot sights like those offered by Ultradot. The red dot will effectively extend your hunting time

afield over either a scope or iron sights, and once you grow accustomed to their use, shooting groups is possible.

Hunting with a handgun can present the hunter with great challenges. By virtue of the rather subdued ballistics of revolver cartridges and their limited range when combined with a short barrel (relative to that of a rifle, that is), the average handgun hunter needs to possess a certain level of fieldcraft. I always like to stay abreast with what the bow hunters are up to, as they make every hunt an up-close and personal proposition. They practice scent control (something we should do), and use the wind to their advantage. While we as handgun hunters are not quite as range limited as bow hunters, it is exciting to get as close as possible to your game.

I practice scent control nearly to the point of obsession. I wash my hunting clothes in scentless detergent, wash myself with scentless soaps, and use scent-covering sprays liberally. This is particularly necessary when hunting animals with “bionic” olfactory senses, like bears (both black and brown varieties) and wild hogs. The wind also needs to be played to your advantage, as no scent-covering product won’t cover your human scent completely, particularly if you are upwind of an animal you intend to take. I have seen wild hogs more than 100 yards away stop, sniff, and change direction with the shift of the wind. These animals rely heavily on their olfactory senses to survive, and their noses are very difficult to fool. I have also found that rubber boots do a good job at covering foot odor, certainly something that should be considered when hunting wild hogs and/or bear. They also keep your feet dry, an added bonus when hunting wetlands and swampy areas.



Author Photo

Heavy recoil and open sights are difficult to master, but it can be done.

Camouflage is up for debate, but, again, I look to the bow hunters for answers. They fairly religiously utilize the latest and greatest camouflage hunting patterns. Some companies such as Sitka Gear are on the cutting edge of camouflage development. If it is good enough for bow hunters, it is good enough for me. I try not to leave much to chance, preferring instead to stack the deck in my favor in every way. If that means donning camouflage, so be it.

In summary, you need a revolver you can shoot well from any number of field positions, the ability to hit what you are aiming at from reasonable distances, scent control, awareness of wind direction to play the wind in your favor — and the time off to get out in the field!



Author Photo

The author uses a number of scent-control products to aid in getting up close and personal with game.

Field Shooting Positions

Let's face facts. Shooting a handgun at game is harder to do well than doing the same with a rifle. The handgun, though convenient, does not have a buttstock you can brace with your shoulder. Your arms alone must provide support to a handgun. This means that we, as handgun hunters, are faced with a challenge unlike that of the typical rifle hunter, thus necessitating more pre-season practice. And, as a hunter, when you practice, it should be in field positions. Let's take a look at those.

When hunting bears (or any game animal) with a handgun, I strongly recommend using a solid rest, when available. The importance of a this

cannot be over emphasized and can make the difference between a hit or a miss or, worse, a wounded animal. (I often use bears as an example, as the consequences of a poorly shot bear are much more grave than with many other North American game animals.) When using a rest, I like to place the frame of the revolver on a solid object like a shooting rail (if you are in a stand), or even the branch of a tree. Shooting sticks are another great and portable option, but more on them later.

The sitting position is a favorite of mine, and it's very stable, particularly if you have something solid like a tree, a stump, or a rusty Ford pickup to lean back against. You should use the insides of your knees to support your elbows, creating a very stable platform for your handgun. You should also plant your feet flat on the ground, providing even more stability.



Author Photo

Matt Cosenzo is seen here wearing excellent camouflage by Sitka Gear. When you choose to hunt up close, use every possible advantage available.



Author Photo

Any available field rest is always preferred to shooting offhand.

When sitting on flat ground without the benefit of a back support, cross your legs with your lead leg (in my case, my left, as I am right-handed), facing slightly towards your intended target. Again, place your elbows on the insides of your knees.

Kneeling is a relatively stable position, but it appeals to me because it can be quickly pressed into use. When getting into the kneeling position, your legs should be placed at a 90-degree angle from each other and your hindquarters should rest on your back foot/heel. Your support elbow (left arm if you are right-handed), should rest in front of your knee and not on top of it. While not as stable a position as a sitting position, where both your arms are rested, this is a position you can more quickly get into.



Author Photo

The sitting position against a supporting object.



Author Photo

The handgun sitting position.



Author Photo

The handgun kneeling position.



Author Photo

The author likes shooting pig silhouettes at 100 yards, offhand. It provides for great practice under field conditions. The real problem with shooting steel with the .500 Maximum is breaking the bases off of the silhouettes!



Author Photo

Offhand is the least stable position, but the one the author practices the most.

Prone is a position that is stable, but I find it a bit awkward to use and still gain control over a heavy recoiling handgun. If you have something to rest the handgun on like a backpack, this is a stable position. I have used the prone position in a pinch, but I don't recommend it unless you have something to rest your handgun on at full extension (to avoid creasing your forehead with the sights or your scope as the gun comes up in recoil). Sometimes terrain will dictate the use of the prone position, and it may be the only way to get a shot off on the trophy bruin of a lifetime. Practice this position in advance to see if it is one you should have in your bag of tricks.

When practicing for the hunt, I tend to do so mainly offhand. Why? Because offhand is the most difficult position to master. I spend a majority of my practice time on the 100-yard line, shooting steel pig silhouettes. The pig silhouette measures roughly 16 inches wide by 12 inches tall — it's a pretty small target at 100 yards. Sounds odd, but when you can consistently hit targets that size at 100 yards, you are prepared for the worst case scenario in the field.

Let's visit shooting sticks for a moment. They come in a variety of forms from telescoping monopods to bipods and tripods (the most stable). Shooting sticks are used extensively on safari in Africa, but, for some reason, have yet to gain the same popularity in North America. They make a lot of sense, providing an expedient and very stable rest no matter what continent you are hunting on. They are used in Africa so much, because they flat-out work, and when a visiting hunter is plunking down five to six figures for the hunt of a lifetime, any and every advantage is welcome to make the outcome a success. I used shooting sticks for the first time on a moose hunt in Maine, and they worked very well. I will surely be using them in the not too distant future on bear. Be sure to practice setting them up and getting into position for the shot.

Practice before the season opens is critical no matter what and how you choose to shoot. But aside from checking your handgun's zero or sighting your weapon in, avoid the bench for practice. That said, in order to gain some level of competency, you will need to burn a lot of powder — more powder than your neighbor with the scoped rifle. That is just a fact of life, when choosing a more difficult discipline, yet one that is imminently more rewarding.

Preparing for the worst-case scenario is a recurring theme in my hunt practice regimen. Some folks have different loads for different game, while

I prefer to have one load that can do it all and perform well under the worst possible conditions. And that is how I view practicing for a handgun hunt: Prepare for the worst, and the “normal” shots come easily.



Author Photo

Shooting sticks are extremely stable and expeditious to use with practice.



Author Photo

When using shooting sticks, rest the frame of the revolver in the cradle.



Author Photo

The author has equipped his Bisley Hunter in .44 Magnum with a Weigand scope base and an Ultradot 6 red dot sight. When hunting hogs at night, in North Carolina, an “Assassinator” green hunting light is also attached.

Ruger’s Hunter Models

As the name implies, Ruger builds specific revolver models with hunting in mind. These revolvers feature a longer barrel (typically 7½ inches), with a unique rib. There are also scallops cut out to facilitate mounting a scope or red dot optic. My Bisley Hunter has proven accurate and deadly, having taken a number of animals.

The Super Blackhawk Hunter revolvers were introduced in 2002 and currently come in two grip configurations, the Bisley and the Super

Blackhawk (plow handle). At one time, .41 Magnum and .45 Colt versions were offered, but currently, it is only available in .44 Magnum.

In the past, the Redhawk was also offered with a ribbed 7½-inch barrel, with scope ring mounting scallops machined into the rib. The Super Redhawks, excluding the short-barreled Alaskan models, also have integral scope ring mounting points. It is obvious the uses Ruger has in mind for these revolvers.



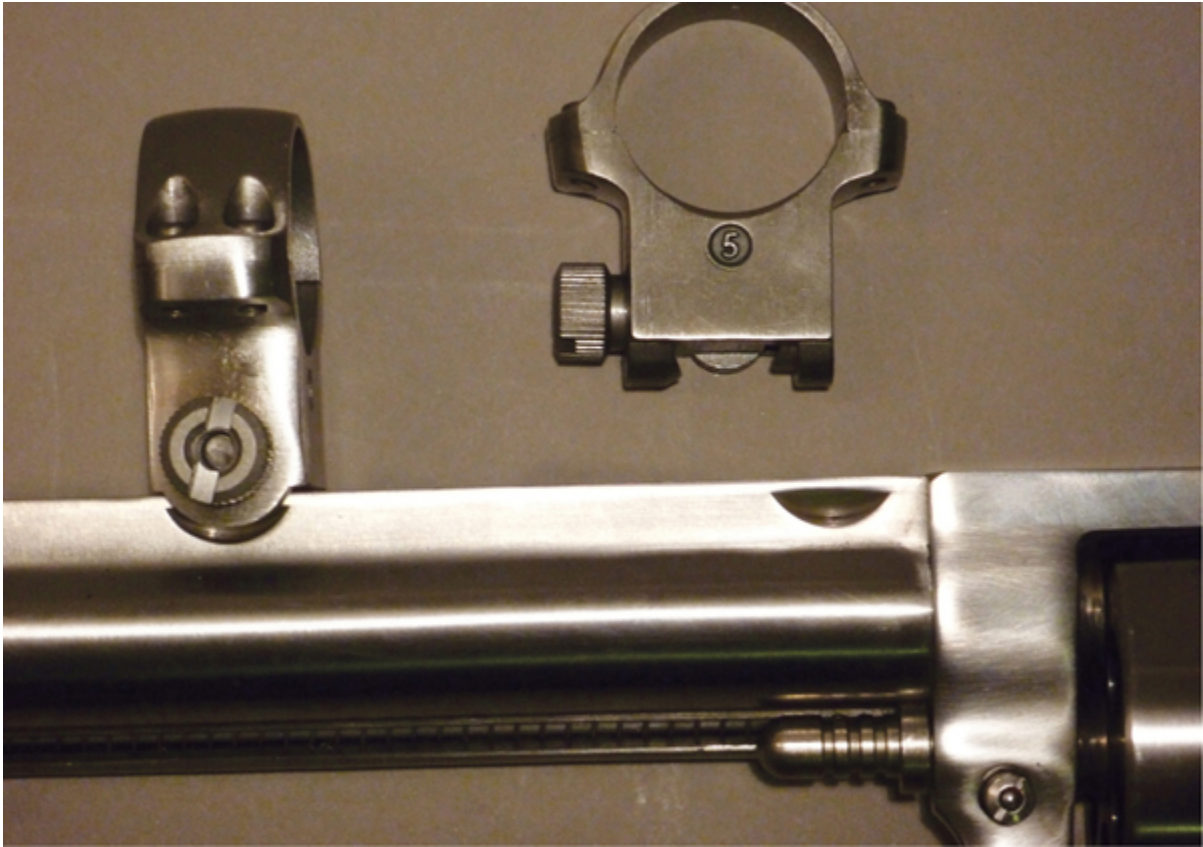
Author Photo

A dedicated rib on top of the barrel is a feature of Ruger's Hunter series revolvers. Scallops are cut into the rib to allow for the mounting of scope rings or a base, such as this unit from Weigand.



Author Photo

Ruger's Alaskan Super Redhawks were designed for defense against animals in the field. The 2½-inch barrel makes these revolvers easy to pack and carry. This one is chambered in .480 Ruger.



Author Photo

Another view of the scallops on the barrel of the Bisley Hunter and Ruger's excellent scope rings.



Author Photo

The author had this Redhawk put together by Jack Huntington for back-up/defensive duty when hunting. It started life as a .45 Colt Redhawk, but was fitted with the .454 Casull cylinder out of a Super Redhawk.



Author Photo

The author took this boar at Wooley Swamp Farm, in Snow Hill, North Carolina, with a Super Redhawk in .480 Ruger stoked with Hornady 400-grain XTP ammo.



Author Photo

Mike Giboney took this bison, in Texas, with his Ruger Bisley in .45 Colt.



Author Photo

The author took this cow moose, in Maine, with his JRH-built .500 Linebaugh Super Redhawk stoked with Grizzly Cartridge's 500-grain LFN loads.



Author Photo

Two of the author's favorite Ruger hunting revolvers, a Bisley Hunter in .44 Magnum, and a Super Redhawk in .500 Linebaugh. Both revolvers are wearing Ultradot red dot sights.



Photo by Allan Griffith

Retired Army officer Allan Griffith took this monster 62-inch bull moose with his .45 Colt Blackhawk loaded with 335-grain WFNs.



Photo by James Swidryk

James "James from Jersey" Swidryk took this boar with one shot from his John Gallagher-built Bisley in .475 Linebaugh.



Photo by Lynn Thompson

What started out as a spear hunt ended with a brain-shot Australian water buffalo. Lynn Thompson never hunts without a backup sidearm on his hip. In this instance, the .454 Super Redhawk saved his bacon, as the buffalo charged him at close range.



Photo by Lynn Thompson

Lynn Thompson, of Cold Steel fame, has taken all manner of big game, including this lioness, with a .454 Casull Super Redhawk.



Photo by Gary Smith

Virginia native Gary Smith dropped this trophy buck in Loudoun County, Virginia, with his Ruger Super Blackhawk Hunter in .45 Colt loaded with handloaded Speer 250-grain jacketed hollowpoints.



Photo by Gary Smith

T.J. Martin with the spike buck he shot with his Mag-na-port Predator .44 Magnum Super Blackhawk stoked with Remington 240-grain SJHPs.



Photo by Gary Smith

Gary Smith and the cow elk he took with a Ruger Super Blackhawk Hunter in .44 Magnum loaded with Remington 240-grain SJHPs.



Photo by Mike Rintoul

Mike Rintoul, proprietor of Grizzly Cartridge and Cast Performance, took this bull giraffe, in South Africa, with three shots from his Bowen-built Redhawk in .500 Linebaugh that he stoked with 525-grain Cast Performance bullets.



Photo by Gary Smith

Wes Daems, proprietor of 7x Leather, maker of really fine holsters, took this Rocky Mountain goat, in Montana, with a rifle, but administered a finisher with his Bisley Hunter in .44 Magnum, emphasizing the convenience of carrying a sidearm even when hunting with a rifle. The chest rig is his own design.



Photo by Wes Daems

This blue wildebeest fell to Gary Smith's .44 Magnum Super Blackhawk Hunter stoked with Garret 310-grain Hammerheads.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Max Prasac was born and raised in sunny, southern California, and spent more time in his local gun shop (the now defunct Lock, Stock n' Barrel, of San Gabriel, California), than was probably prudent, given the direction his career has taken. But the blame for his career trajectory lies squarely on the shoulders of his parents, particularly his late father, Pete, for having bought him his first Daisy BB gun for his eighth Christmas, during the early '70s. What became his handgun fixation began with the purchase of a Smith & Wesson CO2 pellet pistol, and Max's father gave him his first revolver, when Max was barely in high school.

He joined the NRA as a junior member in the early 1980s and enlisted in the United States Marine Corps at the age of 17, where he served as a rifleman until he was honorably discharged in the summer of 1986. Max has a Bachelors degree from George Washington University and has been writing professionally since the mid-'90s. Formerly, he also spent a number of years as a contractor performing disaster relief work overseas, work that included de-mining and ordnance disposal, reconstruction, and running food convoys in war zones. Later, he contracted in the security sector.

A member of Handgun Hunters International, Life Member of the North American Hunt Club and the National Rifle Association (NRA), and a member of the Ruger Collectors Association, Max writes columns for *Bear Hunters Online* and is an occasional contributor to the NRA publications, particularly the *American Hunter*. He is the author of the book *Big-Bore Revolvers*, a Gun Digest publication.

Max hunts whenever possible, making frequent trips to North Carolina, hunting wild hogs. In the winter, he hunts deer and black bear, almost exclusively with handguns, but will occasionally pick up a rifle. He also enjoys off-roading and camping, when time permits.

Max resides in Northern Virginia, with his lovely wife, dogs, turtles, and numerous Ruger revolvers.

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A bit about this book. This is a celebration of Ruger revolvers and not a handbook for collectors. For down-in-the-weeds collector’s information, there are other available titles with which to better enable you in your quest

of acquisitions. My suggestion, for the interested, are the titles available from authors John Dougan and R.L. Wilson. These are invaluable sources of information, the likes of which made this book a possibility. I owe a debt of gratitude to both authors, particularly John Dougan, whose knowledge and attention to detail are only overshadowed by his generosity. Thanks, John.

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Tables

Introduced	Type / Marking	Frame Material/ Finish	Grip Panels	Production Status
1953	Ruger's first frame was the XR3. It was introduced on the Single-Six, same size as Colt SAA, marked "XR3." Had the maker, "Alcoa" on the frames. Also used on .357 and .44 "Flattop" Blackhawks.	Aluminum alloy, black anodized; aluminum alloy natural polished on most engraved Single-Sixes.	Black checkered hard rubber, varnished walnut, rosewood, available as an accessory stag and ivory. Above had black Ruger eagles. Also some experimental plastics, without medallions.	Discontinued 1962.
1958	Bearcat grip frame is integral to cylinder frame, early frames were marked "Alcoa" (Although normally hard to read) and have a PR-1 mark. The triggerguard is a separate part.	Aluminum alloy grip frame, black anodized. Triggerguards are brass anodized with a few black finish.	Resin-impregnated rosewood without medallions. Oil-filled walnut with silver/aluminum medallions containing an impressed Ruger eagle.	Discontinued 1970.

Introduced	Type / Marking	Frame Material/ Finish	Grip Panels	Production Status
1959	Super Blackhawk “Dragoon” style with square back triggerguard; no marking, some observed with a letter such as an “A”; about 300 early frames were ¼” longer than the standard frame, known today as “long frames.”	Steel/blued.	Varnished walnut, oil-filled walnut with black Ruger eagle medallions. Beginning about mid-1971, the medallions were changed to a flat silver eagle.	Discontinued 1973.
1962/1963	Redesigned and replaced the original 1953 XR3 frame, marked “XR3-RED,” also had the maker, “Alcoa,” on early frames. Used on Single-Six, Super Single-Six, Blackhawk, Hawkeye, Old Army. Hawkeye frame had wider trigger slot to accommodate Super Blackhawk trigger.	Aluminum alloy, black anodized.	Varnished walnut, oil-filled walnut with black Ruger eagle medallions. Beginning about mid-1971, the medallions were changed to a flat silver eagle.	Discontinued 1972/73 (except for Old Army which was discontinued about 1985 when replaced with steel).

Introduced	Type / Marking	Frame Material/ Finish	Grip Panels	Production Status
1966	Super Blackhawk Brass "Dragoon" style with square back triggerguard. Same dimensions as 1959 Super Blackhawk. Marked "MR-3DB." Initially for Super Blackhawks, then shipped on various Blackhawks, majority in 1972.	Brass.	Oil-filled walnut with black Ruger eagle medallions or the later flat silver eagle.	Discontinued 1972/73. In catalog for the Old Army until 1975.
1971	Super Bearcat, same dimensions as original 1958 Bearcat. No mark observed.	Steel, blued.	Oil-filled walnut with silver/aluminum medallions containing an impressed Ruger eagle.	Discontinued 1974.

Introduced	Type / Marking	Frame Material/ Finish	Grip Panels	Production Status
1972/1973	<p>Redesign of the Old Model 1962/63 XR3-RED for the New Model to accommodate new trigger spring and safety transfer bar. Same dimensions as Old Model XR3-RED. Marked XRN-3RED on black anodized and blued steel, KXR3 on stainless (began with Super Single-Sixes in 1974). Used on New Model Single-Six, Super Single-Six, Blackhawk, Vaquero, and 4$\frac{5}{8}$ and 5$\frac{1}{2}$-inch barrel Super Blackhawks.</p>	<p>Aluminum alloy, black anodized; steel, blued; stainless steel.</p>	<p>Oil-filled walnut, goncalo alves, rosewood, and simulated ivory, all with the raised silver with black background Ruger eagle. Also simulated ivory with scrimshaw black eagle on Sheriff and other special models. In January 2003, cocobolo grips with the silver Ruger eagle but a red background are seen on the 50th Anniversary Single-Six commemorative revolvers.</p>	<p>Current production.</p>

Introduced	Type / Marking	Frame Material/ Finish	Grip Panels	Production Status
1972/1973	Redesigned the Old Model 1959 Super Blackhawk "Dragoon" to accommodate new trigger spring and new safety transfer bar, same dimensions as Old Model, no mark observed. New Model Super Blackhawk, .357 Maximum.	Steel, blued; stainless steel.	Oil-filled walnut, goncalo alves, and rosewood. Raised silver with black background Ruger eagle medallions.	Current production.
1975	1962/1963 XR3-RED frame produced in stainless steel for Old Army, marked KXR3. Introduced steel in 1985 for blued Old Army. Has wide trigger slot.	Stainless steel; steel, blued	Oil-filled walnut, rosewood, and simulated ivory. Raised silver with black background Ruger eagle medallions.	Current production.
1986	Bisley, a modified Colt Bisley style of a longer grip frame; no major mark observed. Used on Bisley and Bisley Vaquero.	Steel, blued; stainless steel.	Oil-filled walnut, goncalo alves, rosewood, and simulated ivory. Raised silver Ruger eagle medallions.	Current production.
1992	New Model Super Blackhawk "Hunter" with round triggerguard, same grip panel size as standard Super Blackhawk, marked KHRN.	Stainless steel.	Green and silver, black and silver laminated wood. Raised silver with black background Ruger eagle medallions.	Discontinued 1994 but reintroduced 2002 – current production.

Introduced	Type / Marking	Frame Material/ Finish	Grip Panels	Production Status
1993	New Model Bearcat, same panel size as Old Model Bearcat and Super Bearcat, no major mark.	Steel, blued; stainless steel.	Oil-filled walnut, rosewood. Some early guns may have the old style oil-filled walnut panels and flat silver/aluminum impressed Ruger eagle medallions. Most have rosewood panels and smaller raised silver with black background Ruger eagle medallions.	Discontinued 1994 but reintroduced in 1996 – current production.
2001	XRN-3RED “short” frame, about ¼-inch shorter than standard 1972/73 XRN-3RED. Single-Six .32s w/ Vaquero sights, stainless frame marked KXR3 like standard stainless frame.	Steel, blued; stainless steel.	Rosewood, simulated ivory. Raised silver with black background Ruger eagle medallions.	Current production.
2001/2002	Bird’s Head on large and small frame Bird’s Head Vaquero and fixed “Vaquero style” sight .32 H&Rs.	Steel, blued; stainless steel.	Black Micarta, simulated ivory. Raised silver with black background Ruger eagle medallions.	Current production.

Introduced	Type / Marking	Frame Material/ Finish	Grip Panels	Production Status
2004/2005	<p>The NEW XR3 style grip frame is very similar to the original Ruger Single-Action, Colt SAA style, introduced in 1953. The grip panel locator pin is in a slightly different location from the original, primarily due to the new internal safety lock mechanism.</p> <p>These frames are found on the smaller cylinder-framed “New” Vaquero (2004) and the 50th Anniversary .357 Blackhawk “Flattop” (2005). They are also found on the larger cylinder-framed 50th Anniversary .44 “Flattop” (2006).</p>	<p>Steel/blued or stainless. The interior design accommodates the new internal safety lock mechanism.</p>	<p>“New” Vaquero – Black hard rubber checkered panels with the Ruger trademark eagle logo molded into the panel.</p> <p>50th Anniversary Blackhawk “Flattops” – Black hard rubber checkered panels with the old style post 1966 – 1971 “fat neck” trademark black eagle on silver medallions.</p>	Current production.

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.480 RUGER ACCURACY TEST — 7½-INCH BARREL

Load	Advertised Velocity	Actual Velocity	Group Size
Hornady 325-grain XTP	1,350 fps	1,315 fps (avg)	.75-inch
Hornady 400-grain XTP	1,100 fps	1,083 fps (avg)	1.5 inches
Grizzly 425-grain WFN	1,200 fps	1,099 fps (avg)	2.5 inches
Grizzly 380 grain Punch	1,200 fps	1,314 fps (avg)	2 inches

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.480 RUGER ACCURACY TEST — ALASKAN 2½-INCH BARREL

Load	Advertised Velocity	Actual Velocity	Group Size
Hornady 325-grain XTP	1,350 fps	1,129 fps (avg)	“patterned” (at 25 yards)/1.5 inches (at 10 yards)
Hornady 400-grain XTP	1,100 fps	964 fps (avg)	1.5 inches (at 25 yards)
Grizzly 425-grain WFN	1,200 fps	955 fps (avg)	.90-inch (at 10 yards)
Grizzly 380-grain Punch	1,200 fps	1,124 fps (avg)	not shot for group size

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